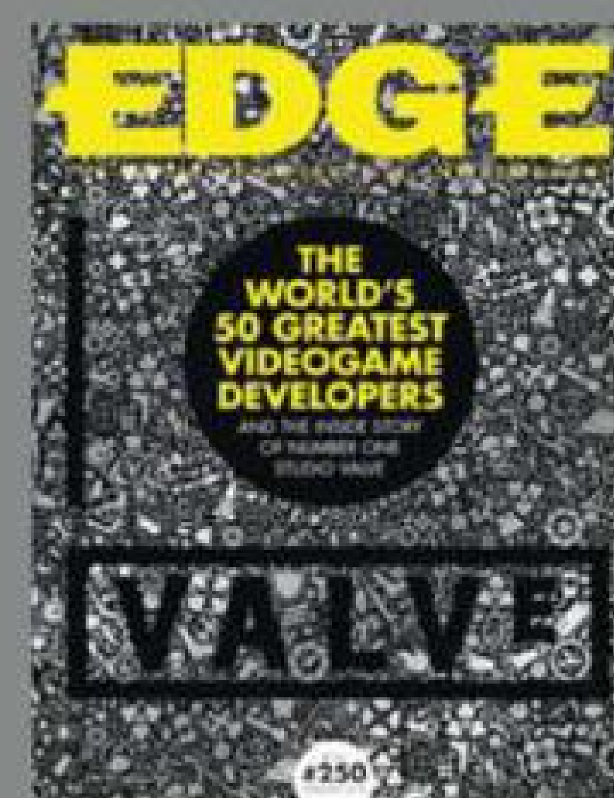

EDGE®
THE FUTURE OF INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT
THE WORLD'S 50 GREATEST VIDEOGAME DEVELOPERS
AND THE INSIDE STORY OF NUMBER ONE STUDIO VALVE
VALVE
#250
FEBRUARY 2013

# How do mainstream gamers regard developers?




Do they notice the logo that flashes up at the start of their games? Do they use it as a mark of quality, going back time and again to the same studios because they made enjoyable games in the past? What does that symbol mean to most players? We'd estimate very little, if anything at all. It's something to impatiently click past, or it's displayed to an empty room while the player's squeezing the teabag in a steaming mug in the kitchen.

Does it matter that developers are often invisible? Of course not. All games should stand up on their own terms as interactive entertainment. But that isn't to say there isn't pleasure and fulfilment to be gained from knowing about the personalities of the people who made them, the context in which they work, and the craft they employ.

This is, after all, the very basis of **Edge**: opening a window into the creative cultures behind videogames. Enthusiasts like you pay a huge amount of attention in order to understand the business, technology and art of making games. We're an inherently future-gazing lot, always dreaming of what the next frontier of technology will bring. And what better way of foreseeing what we'll be playing next than to examine the developers of today? Our inaugural Edge Developer Awards, which start on p64, are in part a guide to the teams that are doing the most to shape that future right now in studios across the world.

None more significantly than our winner, of course. And here's the thing about Valve: it's also probably the most recognised of all developers. If Valve holds any secrets that point to videogames' destiny, perhaps one of the more important is the rising eminence of the people who make them, and the growing relationship between them and their players.

We hope you enjoy our 250th issue. We'd be grateful if you'd consider letting us know what you think by filling in our reader survey. You'll also have a chance of winning an iPad Mini. See p105 for details.



# games




## Hype



## Play








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#250

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FEBRUARY 2013

## Knowledge



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# EDGE


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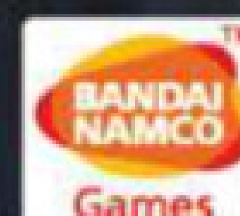













8:46
Monday, June 18th

# KNOW

## GAMING WORLD INSIGHT, INTERROGATION AND INFORMATION


















# VLEDGE

In a more naïve age, it used to be said that the camera never lies, but that was before Photoshop and image manipulation became so prevalent. In gaming particularly, have the marketeers and their insatiable urge to make promo shots (1) seem even better than the real thing now taken over? Are doctored screenshots in any way justifiable, and are we expected to just live with the breed of souped-up, hyper-real 'bullshots' that bear little resemblance to the games we play? We look into the matter on p12. Elsewhere, Swedish kids startup Toca Boca is quietly conquering the App Store (2), so we take a peek at its work on p16. In Canada, meanwhile, indies can now get a helping hand from the newly set up Execution Labs (3). We talk to one of its co-founders, Jason Della Rocca, on p18. We also report back from the inaugural Edge Presents (4) on p20, where Tadhg Kelly and Mark Sorrell delivered their visions for where videogames should be heading next. Cliff Bleszinski, Bobby Kotick and Tim Schafer all find themselves featured in this issue's Soundbytes (5) on p22, illuminating us on matters of legacy and the harsh realities of business. Finally, in My Favourite Game (6) on p24, celebrated sci-fi author and activist Cory Doctorow talks about the digital afterlife, closed gaming systems, and how, when you really think about it, Apple is like a poor armchair maker.



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# The good, the bad and the bullshot

## Exploring the increasingly twisted landscape of the videogame promotional screenshot

To the Oxford English Dictionary, a screenshot is, "An image of the display on a computer screen." How quaint. To gamers, the definition is slightly broader. Our dictionary might read: "[noun] A marketing asset of often indiscernible origin conjured using game assets, poses, rendering and lighting, which may or may not be available to us as players. In extreme cases, an image that's so far removed from the game itself that you should probably be looking up 'CGI', or just watching Aliens."

Time was when preview materials for games involved sprite sheets that told you to the pixel what to expect. Marketing materials were things of ink and Maria Whittaker in a bikini, never to be confused with the events of a game such as *Barbarian*. Magazines in the early '90s would have to use time base correctors and archaic video capture gadgetry to illustrate their reviews. For all the complexities involved, the lines were crystal clear. But not any more.

**"There seems to** be an increasing detachment between big game studios' developers and their own marketing departments," believes *Dear Esther* and *Mirror's Edge* environment artist **Rob Briscoe**. "It seems like some marketing teams have little idea about what goes on behind the actual product they're promoting – the tech, or what the spirit of that game is about.

"Instead, they seem to be obsessed with the notion that videogames should look like big-production action movies to appeal to their male teen demographic in the most obvious way possible. The result being 'screenshots' with lots of added J.J. Abrams lens flares, enhanced boobies, Photoshopped explosions and motion blur, [but] with nary a trace of actual gameplay in sight. FPS games especially seem to be one of the biggest culprits recently."

Bullshots are identifiable by their lighting, with a higher dynamic range than you'd ever see in-game. Also, details tend to emphasised, and the camera angles exotic. The biggest tell, however, is depicting an activity that it's unlikely devs would ever let you experience yourself

**THE CAMERA EVER LIES**
**Some of our interviewees reserve their harshest words for game trailers and TV ads rather than screenshots. Brought to public attention by Axis Animation's notorious trailer for *Killzone 2* (one of the most suspect marketing moves in gaming history, given the unknown rendering power of PS3 and obfuscation by Sony), the practice of giving visual effects companies millions to make a short film that masquerades as representative of a game has only grown worse as this generation drags on. MMOGs are often the worst culprits, for obvious reasons.**

"A screenshot, to me, should be exactly what it sounds like: a taste of actual in-game footage, a frame of what you'll experience when you eventually play the game," explains Briscoe. "I really despise all these heavily choreographed and composited 'screenshots', which seem to be all the rage right now. For me, it serves as a warning: if they can't capture any real, compelling screenshots from their actual game, then in reality it's likely to be a most un-compelling experience. That sucks for the developers, who may actually have created something really worthwhile but [the game] has been branded as something entirely different."

As you've probably observed yourself, a vast spectrum of so-called 'bullshotting' options now exist for 3D games, and publishers aren't afraid to use them. The moment realtime visuals and CG 'key art' became part of the same production pipeline, things started to snowball. Enough familiar game jargon now applies to the fabric of these exquisite, impossible dioramas that the lines aren't clear at all.

Opinions differ over the ethics surrounding screenshots, and strong arguments exist for some degree of 'finessing'. After all, says Funcom junior communications director **Tor Egil Andersen**, "virtually all games lose some of their quality and characteristics when looking at screenshots of them instead of experiencing them in-game. So tweaking brightness and contrast a bit to bring back those qualities is almost always the only thing I do. When it comes to treating the pictures, I'm quite careful not to go too far; we definitely want the pictures to reflect the in-game reality. It is, however, often a good idea to lighten up the specific areas we want to present."

He's right about the difference between a single frame and a game in motion that's running at 30fps with physics and post-processing. In fact, it's more of a gulf. Action whizzing by at 720p without any antialiasing and viewed from your sofa is a world apart from a still of that same game displayed on a monitor or page. Particle effects that achieve depth through fluctuation do



**J.J. Abrams would be proud of the lens flare in this *Mass Effect 3: Omega* shot. While the image is certainly atmospheric and may feel like the combat you remember, fighting in the game itself looks little like this**

nothing when frozen, and might not even be visible at all. Characters expressed through animation can look like idiotic hood ornaments in all but one per cent of shots. And all of this, of course, assumes that the game is in a fit state to be 'photographed' at all.

**Many magazines and** websites are complicit in this trend towards unreality. Quite aside from when all teams have to work with is a small, carefully vetted collection of shots provided by publishers – a common issue at preview stage – the pressure to draw in readers with beautiful imagery often sees the most faithful screengrabs relegated to the visual equivalent of footnotes, simply because they can't pack the same punch as the altered shots. As such, it's fast becoming the norm for a sub-720p PS3 game to be illustrated by images that have been built in a game editor, extensively custom lit, textured with assets too big for either console RAM or disc, and downsampled from 4K or 8K resolution.

Nevertheless, there are plenty of developers out there who refuse to join this marketing arms race, who accept that honesty and perfection don't often mix, and who will instead take dozens of realtime shots in pursuit of that ideal.

"I'm really strict on this," says Ninja Theory communications manager **Dominic Matthews**. "If I take a shot of the game and it doesn't look good enough, I'll take another and another until it does look right. If the content itself doesn't look good enough, I won't take the shot and will wait until the game is ready to be shot.

"To take 20 good screenshots that will make their way into the press will take me around a day, maybe longer. There is a lot to think about: character positioning and poses, the environment and the location of the shot, lighting, graphical or technical imperfections to avoid, field of view, as well as camera position and angle. A good screenshot should be free of technical glitches, be readable at almost any size, and be consistent with what it is you want people to think about the game. Above all, it should do the game justice. That one still image represents the work of, in our case, 100 dedicated developers."

A growing number of developers and marketing people, though, have decided that games cannot do themselves justice, no matter how well they're shot. Instead they create an artist's impression that can be anything from relatively honest, alerting you to the fakery with exotic




Ours is far from the only industry to touch up images to present idealised versions of its wares – take fashion models, food photography et al – but at what stage does presentation become misrepresentation?

camera angles and obviously staged action, to nefarious, mimicking the player's point of view in an effort to pass the gameplay squint test.

Next time you're shown a screenshot that seems to be borderline, don't just think about the camera, look at the lighting. How black are the blacks? How bold are the highlights? How many light sources seem to be working on the character models, and does that really tally with the quantity and quality of lighting you'd expect? Then look at the subject. If it's a sandbox game in particular, how likely is the event you're being shown? Is that ability or terrain even going to be available to you as a player?

Spiralling budgets, ageing consoles and developers torn between a vision and a marketplace have created a landscape where games can almost seem ashamed to be games. It's a place where the final part of a well-loved trilogy like *Mass Effect* relies almost entirely upon CG cutscenes and skyboxes to create spectacle, and has turned to partial bullshots for its marketing (evident in the recent *Omega* DLC).

The solution, assuming a developer has the scruples to want one, is pretty clear: make photogenic games. Even better, give the person taking the screenshots some kind of influence over the tools they'll be using or the subject. Briscoe, for instance, shot his own work on *Dear Esther* with unimpeachable results. At that same end of the spectrum sits *Alan Wake* developer Remedy.

The solution, assuming a developer has the scruples to want one, is clear: make photogenic games

"The best screenshots we've ever put out for our own games have actually been made by our graphics programmer," declares Remedy lead technical artist and co-founder **Sami Vanhatalo**. "He found something that he really liked and then – I wouldn't call it cheating, but he ended up adding features to the rendering engine that let him take the exact screenshot. Whether it was old-school stuff like tweaking the FOV or the colour balance, or adding features that let him tweak the lighting a little bit. All those things ended up improving the actual game, because of a single person's vision of a photograph."

So if a game like *Alan Wake* isn't ready for a close-up, Remedy fixes the game, not the shot. "When it turned out that *Alan Wake* was only shipping on Xbox, we turned down a few knobs to whatever it was we could get out of 360. But when we had the opportunity to ship on PC, we just had to turn up a few knobs and add a few more options."

**Recalling an infamous** *Command & Conquer* screenshot from the '90s, which presented the top-down RTS from a firstperson perspective, he proclaims: "On my watch, you just don't do that. Marketing guys probably love that and would commend you for that, but as game developers we should not do that. That's a marketing asset, not a screenshot of a game."

So have things gone too far now? Is some sort of regulation required for the videogame industry? Do we need something akin to the Advertising Standards Authority's reprimand for air-brushed cosmetics advertisements? "I wish there was [regulation]," says Vanhatalo, "but it'll be impossible to enforce, so it's never going to happen. Take any publicly listed company and their marketing departments are just going to do whatever they can. There's no way you can regulate that. It's like telling people not to break the speed limit." ■

# Digital playthings

## How Swedish kids startup Toca Boca's homespun charm is conquering the App Store

When **Emil Overmar** looks across the App Store's Kids section, a place increasingly dominated by his technicolour brand, Toca Boca, he sees a lot more games than toys. This, believes the producer, is back-to-front; 20 million downloads would seem to agree.

"I guess a lot of kids' IP [holders] moving onto iPad start by thinking of the character, and then they get a studio to try to make something fun out of it," he says. "When grown-ups design stuff for kids, they know that they themselves like books, movies and games. Grown-ups never play with dolls or dress up as someone else. Making games sounds like the obvious choice because we all know games are fun. But what if there's no point to it and it's *still* fun? We embrace that."

And kids embrace it too. Five very catchy notes lead into every app, the Cheshire Cat grin of Toca Boca's logo turning into a frying pan, a purse, a vacuum cleaner, or whatever's about to be toyed with. "Toca Boca!" it chimes, usually a split-second before or after the kid sitting in front of it. "We should have intros that are like The Simpsons," says Overmar, "something that you look forward to."

The intro ends and your kid has a job. In *Toca Hair Salon*, they run a barber shop. In *Toca Store*, they work the tills while a friend or relative does the shopping. *Toca Train*, *Toca Doctor* and the recent *Toca Tailor* are even more self-explanatory; while in *Toca Kitchen* they have to sate the appetites of some very fickle guests, not all of them human. "We don't need levels and we don't need rewards," declares Overmar, "it just needs to feel good feeding that cat a fish. It takes guts to stand up and believe you can deliver that."

On the surface, you might struggle to see what separates *Toca Kitchen*, say, from *Cooking Mama*. But that's because you're a grown-up. Only when you see a child dump the competition in favour of Toca Boca time and time again do you realise how big the difference is.

Overmar names *Little Computer People*, the lauded 1985 life sim, as the brand's inspiration. "I never had a videogame as a kid, so I was always the worst one. All of the games were about: the more you play, the better you are. So your friend plays *Super Mario* for 45 minutes and you play for two and you die, then you hand back the controller. So I wasn't that into gaming until I realised there were games that weren't games."

> "Let's make a new Mattel, a good company that's not just maximising the pink and blue area of the toy store"

Neither of Toca Boca's founders, in fact – the other being former web agency CEO Bjorn Jeffrey – are game developers. Overmar was previously "a user experience guy" at an agency building sites for major Swedish clients "like H&M, big banks, food stores, stuff like that". Jeffrey worked with smaller clients in the south of Sweden. The two met during a meeting with family-run publisher Bonnier, Overmar as an R&D developer and Jeffrey as an advisor. Bonnier was a print publisher wanting to go digital before the tablet market exploded. Overmar recalls, "it seemed like an impossible task. We very much believed they were doing it wrong.

"But it was a really fun time. We created a concept video for magazines on iPad before there even was an iPad.





Emil Overmar (top) and Bjorn Jeffrey, Toca Boca's co-founders

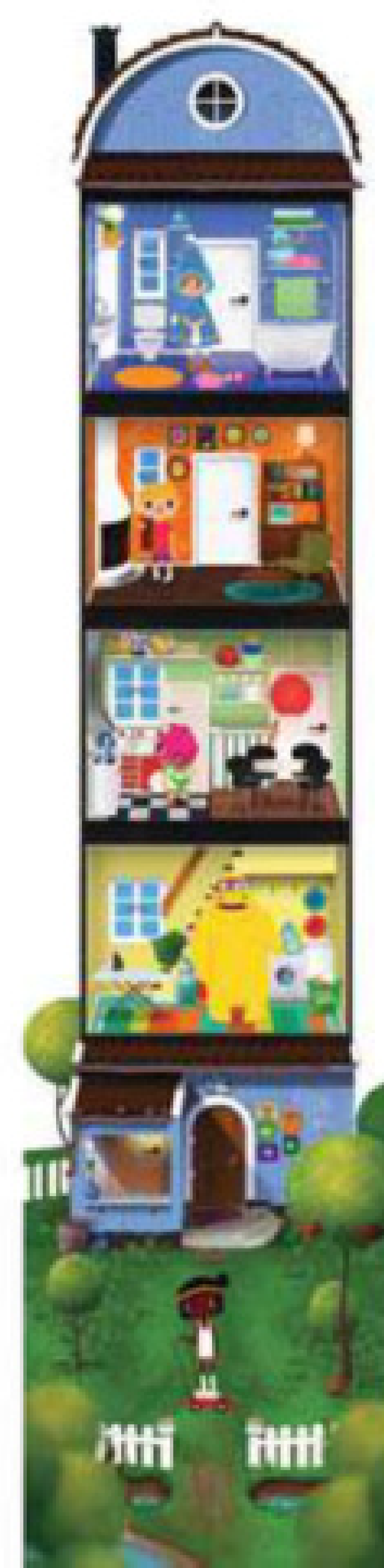
Social e-reading; what will newspapers become in a tablet world? We were a funded startup inside a big company with the freedom to do what we wanted. I wasn't sure if I was going to stay at Bonnier, but when I heard that 'Yeah, we could something with kids,' I was like [clicks fingers] this is what I want to do.

**"So I did** the research and looked at what was out there. I was disappointed with the quality and the strategic thinking behind a lot of it. So the idea became: if this is a big company with lots of money, we should make *the* toy brand on touchscreens. Let's make a new Mattel, a good company that's not just maximising the pink and blue area of the toy store.

"We started with the idea that in the '80s, parents' and children's culture sort of split. A lot of new programmes were coming – He-Man, Transformers, My Little Pony – that parents didn't like. Earlier, play had been more about simulating what parents do, preparing for the world of adults, instead of this fantasy land where everything is Ninja Turtles or Star Wars. So the themes have been influenced by seeing the generation overlap in these classic play patterns."

16 people now handle all of Toca Boca's production in Sweden; another three take care of marketing in New York. The success of products like *Toca Tailor* with teenagers has inspired a delicate broadening of its creative play for 2013 titles. Building its characters and figuring out how to do that is another thing. And merchandise? Maybe, says Overmar, when the numbers are even bigger.

"Right now we're at 20 million, so maybe we need 100 million," he thinks. "Maybe 200 million downloads to be at the point where you can put that product out. But we're preparing for it." ■





iPad's touch interface is involving kids in games before they even reach their second birthdays, creating a new, large, agreeably priced, marketplace, but it's still not yet very well understood



ABOVE **We'll see more of the *Toca House* residents – the company wants to get more from its characters** BELOW ***Toca Tea Party* has kids choose a party theme; lay the table; then eat. The lovingly detailed art and sound are what sells it as an experience**






## TOCA DESIGNER

An industry dad's praise for the simple charms of Toca Boca



**When a kid gets into Toca Boca, parents tend to shout it loud and often on Twitter and at unsuspecting friends. Matt Southern is game director at Evolution Studios. "Going right back to *Little Computer People*, digital toys have often been brilliant," he says. "Toca Boca do it better than anyone else on their chosen platform. They wrap them in joyously bright, hugely polished and charming visuals and sounds. Their character design and use of nuances is impeccable. They ooze quality and make you smile. My family own them all, and every parent I've recommended them to has thanked me for it."**

# Launch control

## The industry consultant who wants to help Canadian indies enjoy a smooth ride

Execution Labs has just launched in Montreal, offering experienced developers assistance in not just making mobile or tablet games, but establishing a successful indie operation too. The incubator will provide office space, tools, funding as well as industry veterans as mentors. We talked to co-founder **Jason Della Rocca** about the new venture.

**Montreal already boasts a huge industry presence. Why base your incubator there?**

At a macro level, Canada gets a lot of praise for how big the industry is, and we're definitely punching above our weight in terms of triple-A productions. But the soup of intervention that exists here has led to a top-heavy industry where, across Canada, something like 80 per cent of the workforce works for foreign-owned publisher production facilities. So from a national, patriotic point of view, that's wealth that leaves the country, it's IP that's controlled and owned outside of the country. The idea is not that the big boys are bad, it's that the big boys in isolation makes for a more fragile ecosystem. But as that side of the industry declines, retail goes down and triple-A struggles, that's the only animal we have in our ecosystem [so] we're high-risk. I know we're talking broadly about macroeconomics here, but you want to have a few shops in town that are doing mobile, a few shops doing social, a few shops doing MMOGs.

**Do you see Execution Labs becoming a halfway house of sorts for local developers who are burnt out on triple-A development and want to set up shop for themselves?**

It's an important distinction that this is meant for experienced developers. Oftentimes, incubators are assumed to be a first stop for kids coming out of school or attached to a university, and that's not what we're doing. We're specifically targeting experienced developers who have shipped games, they know how to make games, but they're lacking funding [and] business knowledge. They've been busy coding and designing, but they haven't been running companies and they lack marketing, PR, investment, management – all that stuff. So Execution Labs is really a platform for experienced developers who have a bit of entrepreneurial spirit, [who] want that creative freedom, independence, want to be their own boss, [and to] take a shot at running their own company. We're that platform.



Della Rocca's incubator is aimed towards developers with experience who are looking to set out on their own




**The way your incubator is structured suggests that just getting a heap of money on Kickstarter isn't enough, and that indies need mentors as well.**

What I'm doing is useless to Tim Schafer. He can go to Kickstarter and get all the money he needs. He doesn't need my help or mentorship, he's fine, and Kickstarter is wonderful for that. However, a ragtag bunch of developers – let's say they were at Ubisoft and they dream of some ninja game Ubi wasn't interested in, so went off to do it on their own. They're experienced developers, but they're not Patrice Désilets, they're not Jade Raymond – and they put together a Kickstarter. Will they even get the buzz? Will they get the money? And if they do, as coders and designers they don't know anything about cash-flow management, they don't know about PR campaigns, running a company, they don't know who to talk to at other companies because they've been buried in the basement of Ubi. The idea behind our mentor roster is we have people coming in each week giving advice on the project, leadership, so that by the end of the programme not only do you have a finished game but your brain has filled with all the guidance and mentorship, so that at [the] point when you're ready to fly the nest, your team and company are ready.

# Breakfast club

At Edge Presents, Tadhg Kelly and Mark Sorrell delivered their visions of where videogames should be heading next




**LONG TIME, NO CHANGE?**
**Edge editor-in-chief Tony Mott opened proceedings with a short introduction, during which he highlighted the length of time it has been since the last such event, 2003's Edge Live. He illustrated the point with an image of a panel that included a sprightly looking Peter Molyneux, Ed Fries and even Phil Harrison with hair. The topics discussed that day? The rising cost of videogame development, the need to reach broader audiences and sexism in the game industry. How little changes.**



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Full reports on each talk

The Academy Of Medical Sciences' conference venue in London provided welcome respite from a bitterly cold morning as the first attendees gathered around coffee and quail's eggs – among other exotic breakfast choices – for the inaugural Edge Presents: Changing The Game event on December 11.

Taking place ahead of 2012's Evolve conference – held just up the road – Changing The Game offered two speakers: videogame designer and **Edge** columnist **Tadhg Kelly**, and Hide&Seek development director **Mark Sorrell**.

Kelly began with a talk titled Knowing Our Place: Why Games Should Sit At The Head Of The Media Table, in which he called for developers to stop considering themselves a last link in the media chain. Building on his **E**247 column, Kelly set out a map that charted an IP's journey from legitimate inspiration, such as novels, through television and film adaptations to what he termed 'exploitation' – the tie-in toys, products and even videogames that look to cash in on such things.

But games, he insisted, should sit alongside novels as generative media, though even that is an uncomfortable fit, since videogames increasingly transcend traditional media outlets.

**"We need to** unhook slowly from the idea that we need to be part of the institution," Kelly said. "The institution doesn't understand games, and expects us to engage on their terms… Games are no longer the red-headed stepchild. In many ways, we're more in touch, and more mainstream in modern culture."

Sorrell's talk, Winning The Living Room, addressed what he sees as the videogame industry's failure to conquer the much fought-for family space – yes, even Nintendo. He puts this down to developers ignoring the lessons that have been learned from free-to-play and mobile gaming as they successfully attract non-gamers at a rate much faster than, say, Activision can manage with *Call Of Duty*. By focusing on the screen, and not the players themselves, Sorrell argues, console devs have created ever more immersive experiences that in turn exclude the rest of the room's occupants.

"There's an argument that for games to become more accepted they need to become richer and more complicated – but that's not true," he implored. "They need to become the exact opposite, because people don't understand what games are right now." ■





ABOVE **Kelly told the crowd he didn't mind how they said his name (it's like the first half of tiger).** RIGHT **Sorrell said games should be as good to watch as to play – like *Johann Sebastian Joust***

# SXSW GAMING EXPO

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# Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



## "I don't want the chainsaw gun to be my legacy."

Then perhaps you shouldn't have invented it, **Cliff Bleszinski**

"You find out two executives are planning to break their contracts, keep the money you gave them and steal 40 employees. What do you do? You fire them."



**Bobby Kotick** would rather not forgive and forget



"Prediction: the next Bungie game will be singleplayer only; the multiplayer aspect of that game will be subscription only. Activision's going to try it, because **they're greedy pigs."**

**Michael Pachter** consults his well-worn crystal ball for Destiny's future

"If you're not important to their bottom line, they will cut you loose and let you die."



**Tim Schafer** lays out the reality of working with publishers



# ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



**Game** XD Dark Ride
**Developer** Triotech Amusement

Not many people got the opportunity to play Namco's *Galaxian³* in its native form – no great surprise since it was a coin-op that retailed at $150,000, putting it out of reach for all but the swankiest of 1990s arcades. For those that missed out, Triotech's *XD Dark Ride* offers a taste of a similar type of play, and outguns *Galaxian³* by supporting up to eight players side by side rather than Namco's maximum of six.

*XD Dark Ride* also differs in that, rather than being a dedicated cabinet, it is an environment in which operators can place various games. To date, Triotech has released *Los Banditos*, *Pirates* and *Zombies*, but all of the options bear the same central conceit: use a lightgun to exterminate incoming enemies.

Taking up a hefty 9.4x6m of floor space, the *XD Dark Ride* cabinet incorporates a seat-motion system capable of a claimed 400 movements per second, and the action plays out across a curved screen displaying stereoscopic 3D imagery, to the accompaniment of 360-degree audio.

Each game is timed to last precisely three minutes, but the cabinet helps to ensure that your memory of the experience is prolonged somewhat via its ability to capture images of participants' faces as they play, then print them out upon conclusion, complete with their respective scores.



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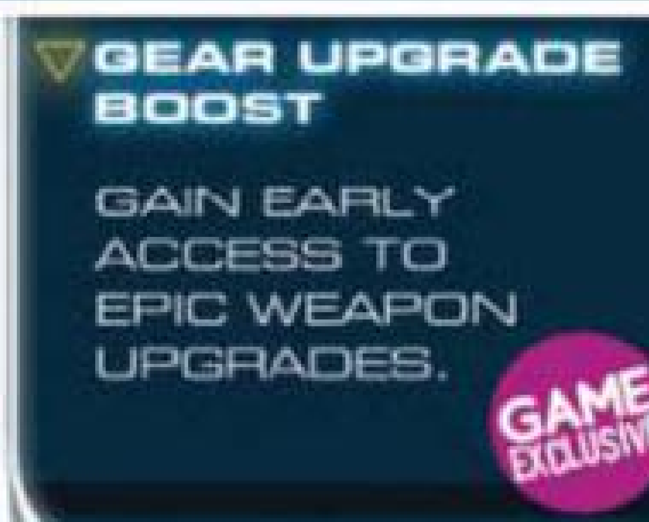


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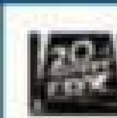


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Available on: XBOX 360. XBOX LIVE PS3 PlayStation Network



gearbox software



SEGA

# My favourite game
# Cory Doctorow

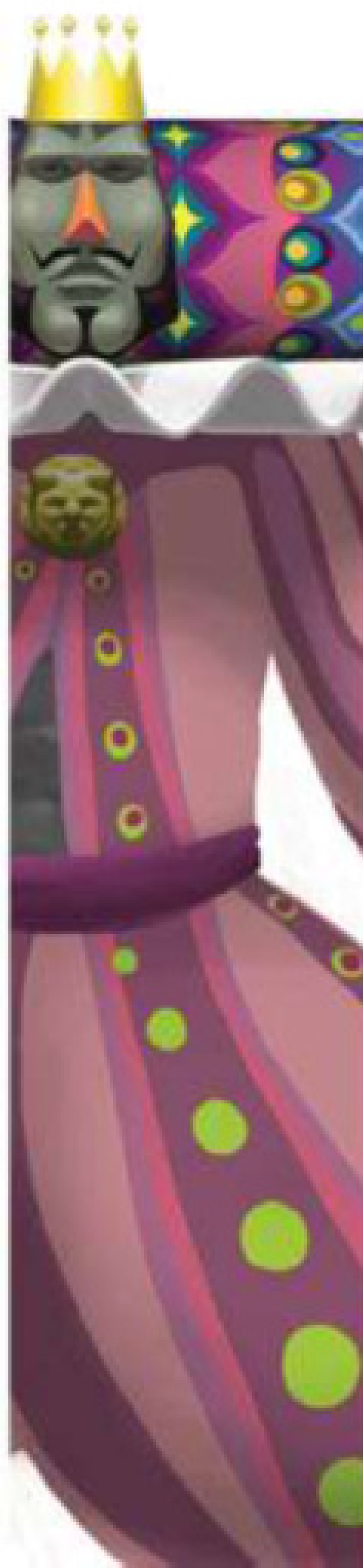
The celebrated sci-fi author and activist talks about digital afterlife, and why Apple would be a bad armchair maker

Of all the pundits who've queued up to take a bite out of Apple for its closed-ecosystem mindset, author and activist **Cory Doctorow** has delivered the most cogent detractions. We spoke to him about authoritarianism in game design and whether the App Store has done more good than ill overall.

**HACKER WRITER**
**Doctorow has always been fascinated by technology, how it promises – and just as often threatens – to alter our lives. He released his debut novel Down And Out In The Magic Kingdom in 2003, receiving a Nebula Award nomination and a Locus Award for Best First Novel. Doctorow has both graduated from and served as an instructor at the Clarion sci-fi writing workshop. During one stint there, he had *Half-Life* writer Marc Laidlaw speak to his students. He also finds time to co-edit the weblog Boing Boing.**

**What are your early gaming memories?**
I went through all of the different hardware cycles: we had Game & Watch, we had Atari, Intellivision, ColecoVision. And there was an interesting thing that happened where someone else in your circle would upgrade, say, from Intellivision to ColecoVision and after a few months they would sell or just give away the entire old system with 25 games, which would all be new to you. So I remember a few 'big bangs' where we'd get Atari systems or whatever and we'd have 40 games to play, which was always exciting and also kind of an interesting early lesson in the very inflationary value of videogames.

**You and Charles Stross published The Rapture Of The Nerds last September. What role do games play in that future?**
We borrowed a lot of metaphors both from videogames and broadly from virtual worlds. And certainly the notion of singularity has gone all the way around, where you have [author] William Gibson just watching kids playing games in arcades and thinking 'Where is it these kids are trying to go to by pushing themselves into these cabinets?' and then inventing cyberspace. So what we wrote about was what a digital afterlife would look like if it was designed by people who grew up playing games. Not as a prediction of what the best way of doing it would be, but rather as a prediction of what sort of habits of thought people would slip into.

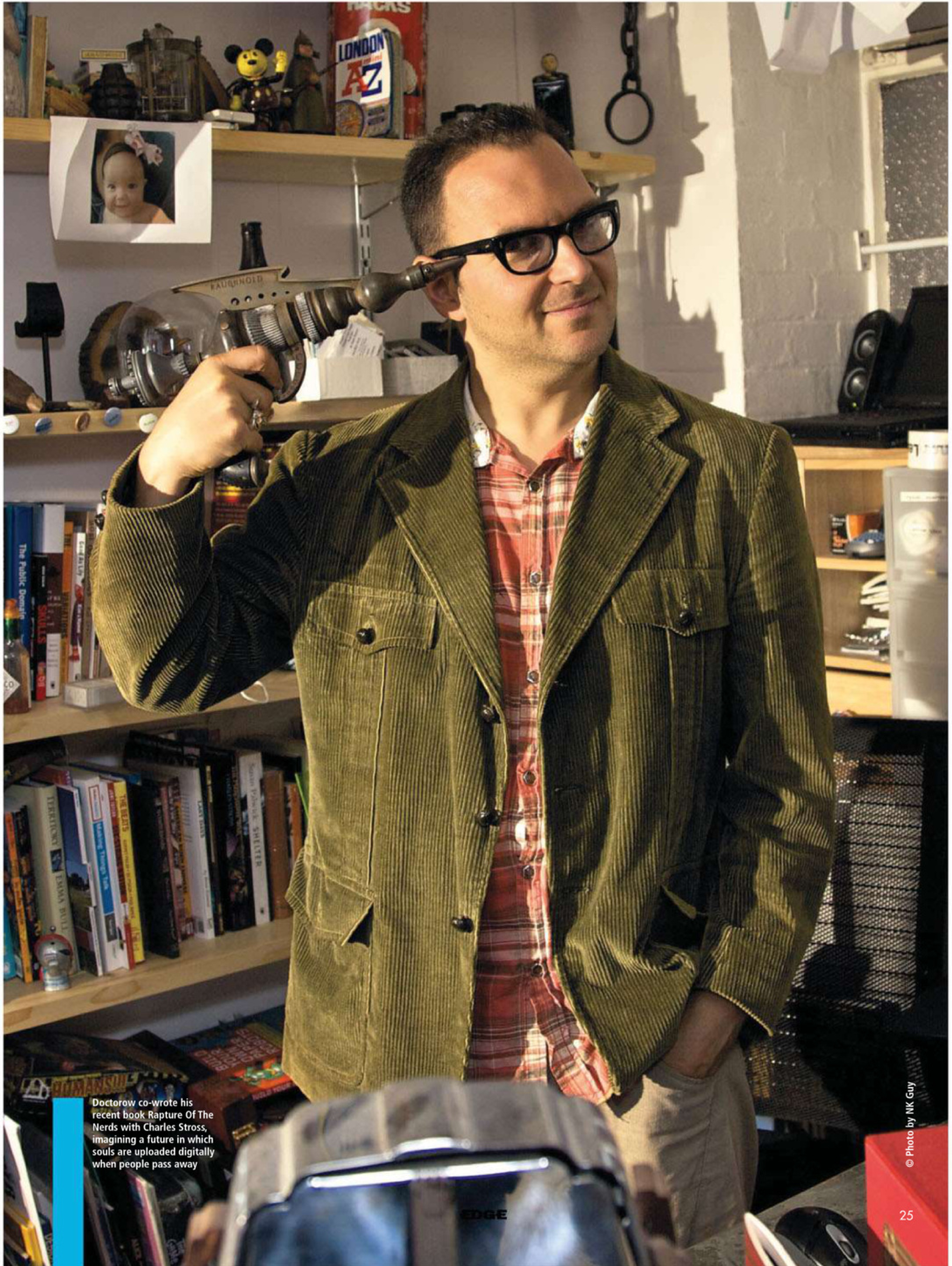


**Do you feel more affection towards PC gaming because of its modding culture, as opposed to console games, which tend to have a more closed ecosystem?**
I think all games have some inherent authoritarianism, right? Think of a tabletop RPG; think of D&D. Ultimately the dungeon master makes a lot of rolls behind her screen and doesn't tell you what number comes up. That's authoritarian in some sense, but it's a kind of benevolent dictatorship in the same way that you don't get a vote when the punch line comes when you go to see a [stand-up] comic. Comedy depends on you wanting to know what the punch line is and not being told until the moment you reach the breaking point, putting you in suspense. Suspense is authoritarian. So all games have an element of that, because the dungeon master – whether it's a game you're playing locally against an AI or over a network against AIs that have a rule-keeping function – at a certain point all this stuff is something like an authoritarian system, but one you opt in to… One thing I do worry about is that there's something about the ability to be an unfettered authoritarian that a certain kind of company just falls in love with.

> "It is literally illegal for you to sell that game to me and for me to buy it from you unless Apple approves it"

**You've been critical of Apple's walled-garden approach. Do you think the App Store has been a net positive for indies?**
I don't know how to define a net positive… I can see the positives and I can see the negatives. I think the negatives are pretty important. Whatever things iOS has done to help software companies deliver games to players, there are a couple of important things that it's also changed. One of those things is that if you make a videogame and I have a device that can run that videogame, it is literally illegal for you to sell that game to me and for me to buy it from you unless Apple approves it. I know that's the norm from the console world, but it's a crazy thing when you put it that way, right? You've got an easy chair and a light; I've got a typewriter and I've written a book. Why should it be illegal for me to sell my book to you to sit under your lamp to read it if the people who made the easy chair don't agree?

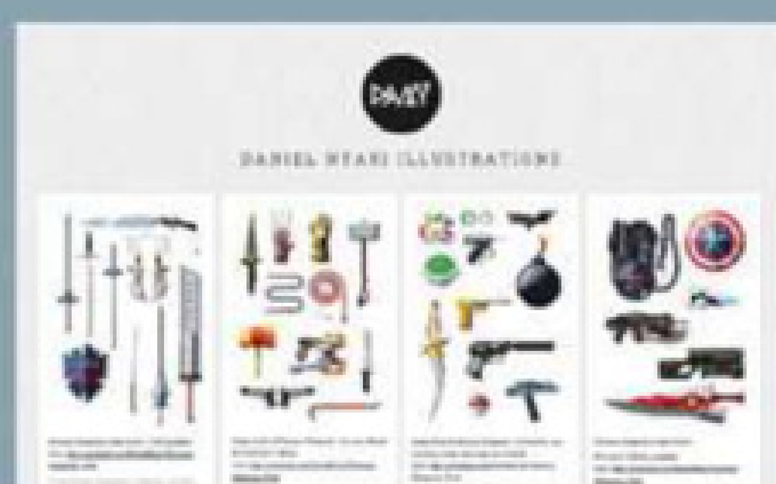
**Tell us about your favourite game.**
The game I've gotten the most enjoyment out of is *Katamari Damacy*. It has the wit of something like *Portal*, the tremendous game mechanics of something like *Mario*, and then taps into those deep brain structures *Tetris* tapped into. In the same way that if you play *Tetris* for a little while everything in the world starts to look like blocks that can be tessellated to fit together in lines, if you play *Katamari* for a while you begin to wonder whether you can knock things over. ■

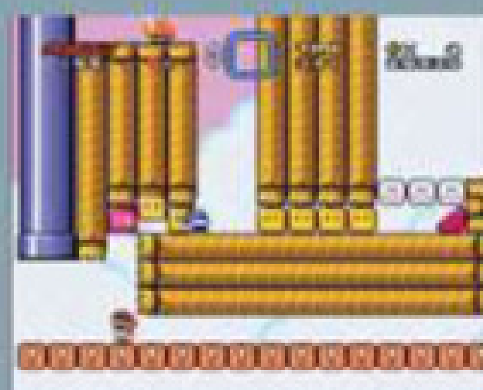


Doctorow co-wrote his recent book Rapture Of The Nerds with Charles Stross, imagining a future in which souls are uploaded digitally when people pass away

## WEBSITE
**Daniel Nyari Illustrations**
**www.bit.ly/WkS4o3**

It's OK to find videogame weapons beautiful – they're never going to actually hurt anybody, and they tend to be enormous and ridiculous, parodying the horrible things they're ostensibly portraying. Enter Romanian-born artist Daniel Nyari, whose highly stylised illustrations have featured in the New York Times and Creative Review. He has produced a poster of fictitious weaponry drawn from movies, comics and games. Soul Edge is in there, alongside *God Of War*'s chained blades and *Half-Life*'s Gravity Gun. Our favourite, though, is the *Gears Of War* Lancer – Nyari makes this design classic look somehow quaint, even lovable. His Tumblr also showcases a range of other works, such as his collection of famous robots, which includes Mega Man and Clank.



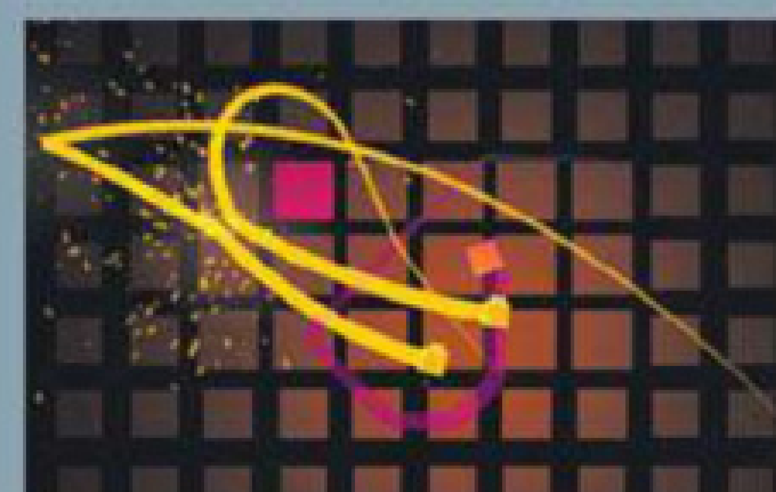



## VIDEO
**Asshole Mario**
**www.bit.ly/TwF55r**

*Kaizo Mario* (or *Asshole Mario*, if you prefer) is a mind-bendingly hard homebrew version of *Super Mario* created by Japanese ROM hacker T. Takemoto. This playthrough of *Mario 3*, stage 9 will help you understand the brilliant torture Takemoto can perform with *Mario*'s toolset, and it's also hugely entertaining to watch the player, R Kiba, who's a friend of Takemoto, painstakingly grapple with it. You'll cheer as he reaches near-inaccessible switches and gasp as he tries to work out how to get pass the next sadistically placed enemy.

## WEB GAME
**Three Body Problem**
**www.bit.ly/ZUvA54**

Robin Burkinshaw's *Three Body Problem* is a surly but welcome addition to the 'pump a jubilant fist in the air if you manage to survive for more than 10 seconds' genre of games. You guide a block around the field of play, trying to navigate between highlighted boxes to nudge your score higher by single digits while a pair of relentless blocks chase you like heat-seeking missiles. Though abstracted into block form, make no mistake: this is the deadliest pair of aggressors that a game has delivered since *Dark Souls*' Smough and Ornstein. Avoiding a collision course will require much dancing, ducking and dodging, but the wonder in this apparently simple game is in the variation of responses these bastards take to your up, down, left, right inputs. Mastering them is an art.



# THIS MONTH ON EDGE

The hoard of debris that piqued our attention during the production of **E**250

## SEGA MEGA DRIVE ARCADE NANO
**www.bit.ly/VuhlwT**

It makes our gaming youth feel altogether disposable when a batch of *Sonic The Hedgehog* games can fit on a lightweight plastic keychain. But just in case you'd like to be able to go bounding across the familiar plateaus of Green Hill Zone any time the urge strikes, the Mega Drive Arcade Nano connects to the AV input on a TV. The keychain itself contains a tiny joystick and buttons, which click satisfyingly enough beneath the thumbs, and still beat virtual touchscreen buttons by a mile.




## continue

**THQ lives!**
Troubled publisher files for bankruptcy, but is then immediately sold. Erm, congratulations?

**thatmusicaward**
Austin Wintory makes history with a Grammy for his beautiful soundtrack for *Journey*

**What a relief**
Government confirms tax relief for UK devs. Touché, Canada?

**Attack of AM2**
Oh the memories

## quit

**RIP Eurocom**
The veteran dev is no more, due to a "steep decline" in demand for console games

**U still up?**
Nintendo restricts adult-rated Wii U downloads to 11pm-3am. Else Mario cries

**Culturally British**
Devs can earn tax relief points by setting their games in the UK?

**Dizzy kickstops**
Egg on nostagia's face



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Follow **Edge** on Twitter

## TWEETS

I'm actually hesitating setting up this new Wii U system because it means saying goodbye to my GameCube *Animal Crossing* town. Dilemma.
**Tim Schafer @TimOfLegend**
*President/CEO, Double Fine Productions*

Here in the UK – no guns, no mass shootings. Give it a rest about fucking video games.
**Graham Linehan @Glinner**
*Scriptwriter and director*

If you're up in arms about ownership of the pics of your breakfast you post on Instagram, maybe you need a more interesting life
**Giordano Contestabile @giordanobc**
*Executive producer, Bejeweled, PopCap*

No one has beat *Curiosity* yet? FFS.
**Cliff Bleszinski @therealcliffyb**
*International man of leisure*

Wanting, needing, waiting For you to gamify my love
**Ian Bogost @ibogost**
*Game developer and theorist*



# DISPATCHES FEBRUARY

Within Dispatches this issue, Dialogue sees **Edge** readers discuss the midlife crisis of the FPS and the tricky thing about player narratives, the lack of excitement that some newly announced hardware is inspiring, and why you've stuck with us for 250 issues. Then, in Perspective, **Steven Poole** ponders the bountiful riches experimental philosophers could reap from games, **Leigh Alexander** considers what the crises of 2012 tell us about gaming, and **Brian Howe** names the 50 worst developers ahead of the Edge Developer Awards on p64.



**www.edge-online.com**
Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers



Issue 249

# Dialogue



Send your views to edge@futurenet.com, using 'Dialogue' as the subject. Our letter of the month wins a 3DS

## Console me

I want to feel excited about the supposed living room revolution that's bearing down upon us, I really do. But I can't help feeling slightly disappointed by the potential reality of Android consoles like Ouya and GameStick, and Valve's Steam Box PC. The idea that the big three could be rocked by a redistribution of power as disruptive as the smart device uprising that caught handheld consoles off guard is a tantalising one, sure, but it's accompanied by the idea of playing auto runners on my TV, and I just can't shake the horror of that thought.

Unboxing new hardware has long been, for many – if not all – reading this, an incredibly evocative moment. The smell of the moulded plastic, the weight of device, and most excitingly of all, the chance to boot up the two or three discs you managed to scrape enough pennies together for. But while I can see the undeniable benefits of a super-cheap new guard – and Ouya's not exactly ugly, either – there's something a little hollow about the idea of plugging in a new device and playing games you're already familiar with – and probably have on the more powerful phone in your pocket.

The Steam Box faces the same problem – high-end amazing games, sure, but high-end amazing games that I can already play elsewhere. For years we've bemoaned the development resources squandered on making a game compatible with bespoke, closed platforms, and wondered how much better the quality of a multiplatform game could have been if its creators hadn't had to wrestle with, for example, an Emotion Engine. But I'm now realising that I can live with a lacklustre port for the sake of some truly worthy bespoke efforts – I quite like exclusivity, it turns out.
**Harry Renfield**

No pleasing some people, eh? But certainly, all games should be built with the specifics of their platform in mind.

## Shooting your mouth off

In **E**249, Clint Hocking argued that the FPS still has room to grow before it hits a mid-life crisis. In some respects, at least for certain games, this mid-life crisis has already occurred. Two games mentioned by Hocking were *Call Of Duty* and *Dishonored*.

Taking a look at *Call Of Duty* first, the franchise's latest instalment, *COD: Black Ops II*, could only be described as the overtly expensive, shiny, shaped-like-a-penis red sports car of FPSes. Activision head **Eric Hirshberg** promised that the next *Call Of Duty* would "bring meaningful innovation to the series". But really all it brought was an even bigger budget and Hollywood scriptwriter David S Goyer. Perhaps if they'd really wanted meaningful innovation they shouldn't have hired Goyer, the scriptwriter behind the underwhelming Jumper and all-but-forgotten-in-light-of-the-other-two-films Batman Begins. Like any shiny red sports car, you can't help but admire the engineering and way it looks, but as soon as the idiot behind the wheel starts revving the engine you just roll your eyes. *Blops II* is by no means a bad game, but it's pretending to be something it's not. And soon the thrill of that shiny car will wear and players will realise they gained nothing from this game that they hadn't previously been given.

On the opposite end, *Dishonored* takes the role of one of those people who questions their entire life choices up until the present. Just as you can't live in the moment if you worry too much about the past, so too a player can't be fully immersed in a game if they're constantly worried about getting a zero-kill stat. At least in *Blops II*, you're fully immersed in your need to kill all who stand before you. It seems like a step too far to ask players to restrain themselves to such an extent, and I'll be damned if most players didn't have two separate saves: one to play the game as a methodical pacifist, and one to be a psycho killer. Inhibitive gameplay is bound to elicit an extreme opposite reaction.

With this in mind, it's clear some games struggle with the idea of forcing meaning into their games. And yet games do not need to force meaning onto players, because players will find their own meaning within a game – if it's well-structured and scripted subtly (or perhaps not at all). Giving the player the option to kill or not kill is a worthwhile endeavour, but choosing to punish – or even reward – their decision detracts from the meaning a player can get from a game. A balance needs to be struck between an FPS player's desire to shoot things and the impact that shooting these things does and does not have on them.

Games have a strange need to force story upon players, a lingering connection between games and films that I feel inhibits the true immersive and personal experience of gaming. One aspect I have little time for is the cutscene, a pointless and obvious enforcement of story that should be naturally incorporated into gameplay dialogue.

Games like *Day Z* are really beginning to unlock the true potential of games to be whatever we make of them. Some of the most meaningful gameplay stories I've heard and experienced are from *Day Z*, from someone slowly bleeding and dragging themselves all the way to a hospital through a zombie-infested town, to cowering in a corner from a horde of zombies that came from nowhere.
**Catherine Hanks**

We predict a big shakeup in big-budget story-based FPSes. They're very expensive to make, and most *COD* players are in it for the multiplayer anyway. Can publishers go on justifying making six-hour games?

## Porta potty

Will portable gaming ever take off? No, I don't think it will. The only portable games I play are on my phone; I play them because my phone just so happens to have games on it. I didn't buy said phone to play games, I bought it because I needed a phone. I think Sony and Nintendo have missed the point with portable games. I don't play games on the move because I want to; I do it because I can. This tacked on feature has been admirably used by people like Rovio and Digital Chocolate to great effect, but it isn't, and never will be, a viable platform for the kind of games we now expect on home consoles. We can't play today's triple-A titles on a mobile device like we do at home, so stop trying to make a portable version and concentrate on making a good home version. I don't want to play *Angry Birds* on my Xbox and never will. I don't own a portable game device but my mum has a 3DS. Portable gaming is a novelty, not a specific market that is worth investing in. I don't want HD graphics on a small screen with fiddly controls on the bus to work. I want HD graphics on my massive telly with a ergonomically designed pad to play my game with my feet up in the living room. Lastly, my mum never takes her 3DS out, she only plays it at home.
**Phill Copes**

"Portable gaming is a novelty, not a specific market that is worth investing in"

Mobile's not the place for cut-down ports of triple-A console games, but a novelty? Millions would vehemently disagree. Also, Famicom roots aside, it's simply wrong to play *Advance Wars* on a TV.

## 250 issues

One word: congratulations. Computers, consoles, editors and contributors have come and gone, yet you have remained steadfast. **Edge**, you are a shining light, a beacon of enlightenment, an ambassador of truth and honesty. You have always been there when I have needed you. I have no idea as to how many computers, consoles and pieces of software I've purchased over the years. It runs into the hundreds, if not the thousands, and I have always used you as a strong barometer in the decision-making process. Like good friends, there have been instances where we've disagreed and bickered, but on the whole I have found your judgement and stance consistent, accurate and fair.

When I look back, personal favourites include issues 0/1 and the realisation that I could finally purchase an intelligent and informative magazine that would not only critically celebrate the best of the burgeoning games industry, but would also criticise when such criticism was deemed necessary. There was **E**48 and the hoo-ha following 'that' *GoldenEye* review (come on **Edge**, it must be time to retrospectively award it a 10!?). **E**50 and the slipcase, **E**66 and *Ocarina Of Time*, and the absolute glut of 9s and 10s when **Edge** issues hit the 180s and gaming finally seemed to shift into the new and promised era that I had long dreamed about. And, of course, a special mention has to go to the covers. Their design and artwork have been fantastic.

The one annoyance – it's tiny, and it's on a personal and gratuitous level – is the two changes of magazine size, which means the **Edge** collection just doesn't look right when spanned across one single shelf!

To the contributors from the previous 250 issues, and those behind the scenes that made and still make **Edge** happen, a heartfelt thank you. Words cannot adequately describe the pleasure of the immediate hours after the latest issue drops through the letter box, or the satisfaction of picking up a back issue and re-living its contents years later. **Edge** magazine has always stated that it showcases the Future Of Interactive Entertainment. This is as relevant now on the front cover as it was nearly 20 years ago.

Way back in issue 100, you said, "We hope you still enjoy it." My reply after 250 issues and nearly two decades is one word: a simple and categorical YES!
**Aaron Barber**

We've kind of asked if you still enjoy it in this issue, too (see our reader survey on p105), but we're delighted you've been getting so much from **Edge**. We can't really not award you our prize 3DS for indulging our pride. We hope you enjoy that as well.

*Goldeneye* an **Edge** 10? Aaron Barber would retcon it that way



## ONLINE OFFLINE

Your responses to topics on our website at www.edge-online.com

### Why do we find videogame violence so entertaining?

I believe it's human nature!
**Christopher Leah, Facebook**

We hunt. That's what our genetic code says. Men hunt. In a society where this is no longer needed, we need to find ways to channel that 'need', video games are a sure nice way to blow off some steam without any harm.
**Gonçalo 'Shiryu' Lopes, Facebook**

I don't actually find it entertaining at all. I refuse to play any FPS.
**Marion Emeis, Facebook**

Both violent and non-violent games are fun. It's more about the challenge, what's 'accomplished'.
**Kayin Lee, Facebook**

### Vita has had a tough first year since launch

Sony needs to smell the Red Bull and wake up to the changed world of portable gaming. The App Store and cheap games offering variety drives mobile success.
**Sean Tagg, Facebook**

My eldest son now has a Vita and my youngest a Kindle Fire. I've tried the quick fix App Store-style games on the Fire and was bored within five minutes. Tried *LBP* on Vita and completely in love with it! Sony could easily have a winner if they'd just bloomin' market it properly.
**Alistair Taylor, Facebook**



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STEVEN POOLE

# Trigger Happy

No mere escapism, Virtue's Last Reward impresses with its moral dilemmas and philosophical leanings

That evil giggling bunny puppet sure knows what he's doing. He is the lapine proxy ringmaster of the wonderfully unhinged room-escape adventure *Virtue's Last Reward* (reviewed on p112). The escapes are crunchy, and I enjoyed the 'brain memory' metaphor for the notepad; it's wittily limited to two pages, so that you end up with an illegible palimpsest of scrawled, panicky notes in red, blue and green. But what I found most intriguing was the game's so-called 'novel' aspect. I was initially sceptical of anything so described, but it actually provides a vivid and innovative illustration of the way videogames can become systems for the exploration of moral choices.

A recent study by psychologists at Indiana University asked 75 undergraduate videogamers to fill out a "moral foundations" questionnaire and then play *Fallout 3*. It turned out that their answers to the questionnaire – answers about how they would behave in real life – reliably predicted the moral choices they made in the game's world. When they made an antisocial choice, they felt guilty. Of course, a cunningly designed videogame will play on the guilt it expects you to feel for an assumptively 'bad' decision. But the player must exercise an extra layer of judgement, too, not only asking 'What is the right thing to do?' but 'How will this choice affect my progress in the game? What kinds of punishments or rewards will the designers have laid in store?'

The exposition of the Ambidex Game in *Virtue's Last Reward* brilliantly exploits this reflexive duel of player-against-system-architects as well as player-against-characters. The game lays out the structure of the classic Prisoner's Dilemma, a foundational scenario of game theory, with a clarity equal to that of any philosophy or economics text, but then it does what such texts can't do and makes you play it. When familiar fictional characters are your potential allies or those you might betray, a visceral layer of understanding is added. Through the lucidly bleak explanation of my geek-intellectual sidekick, Phi, the game steered me towards betrayal. I understood that it was the rational choice. But I wanted to be good, heroic. Surely the game would reward my idealism? So instead, at the last minute, I chose to ally with our fellow prisoner. If she allied too, all would be well. And then came the results. She betrayed us. I was outraged, even though I knew it was the sensible call. And now Phi and I were just one bracelet point from death.

> Why don't more videogames play with game theory? The invitation is right there in the name

So why don't more videogames play with game theory? The invitation is right there in the name of the discipline. Games could, moreover, also model the kinds of dilemmas associated with the modern movement of 'x-phi' or experimental philosophy, which surveys the intuitions of non-philosophers when they are confronted with lurid thought experiments. Should you throw a switch to divert a runaway train from a track where it would kill five people onto a track where it would kill only one? What about if, to save the five people, you instead had to push a fat man off a bridge and onto the track? And if a fat man is stuck in the only exit to a cave, so that ten other people will starve to death if he can't be moved, should you blow the fat man up with dynamite?

It's an odd feature of x-phi examples that they often involve a fat man, usually because his bulk can make an important difference to the environment. So build the situation in a videogame where the fat man is lovably characterised and we actually have to heave him off the bridge or detonate his adipose person ourselves. Would our moral intuitions be different? Might the necessity for a naturalistic simulation to fill in his details (age, personality, and so on) reveal that some of those details make an unforeseen difference, and that the abstract thought experiment is therefore incomplete?

Videogames could engage fruitfully with such research because they are process toys that allow you to explore, rather than only to predict or imagine, different actions and their outcomes. Yet to do this with branching narrative systems, as in, say, *Mass Effect*, one normally has to reload a save point and choose differently the next time. This always feels a bit like cheating, and so it's possible to argue that, in such games, the consequences of your decisions don't matter because the 'choice' is illusory or weightless.

One alternative is for a game just not to allow you to go back, as in *Heavy Rain*. *Virtue's Last Reward*, by contrast, incorporates into the ludic fiction itself a means of exploring the consequences of different actions: its ingenious Flow system, through which you can jump back to a previous decision point. In this way, the game is no longer merely a time-reversible system for exploring the consequences of single actions or the longterm ramifications of single-action chains, but a metaconsequential simulation whose map is the entire possibility space. Here, then, in a deliciously eccentric handheld work of art, is the idea of a videogame that is at once both laboratory and seminar room for game theory and experimental philosophy. That darned rabbit is even more freakily cunning than I thought.

*Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net*



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LEIGH ALEXANDER

# Level Head

## Looking back on a year of controversy, perhaps gaming's identity crisis marks a fracture point

When I'm asked what defined 2012 in gaming – not that I'm asked often, given that the nuances of our industry still fall outside of normative party talk – I usually say I think this has been a year of identity crisis.

We've seen many firestorms this year, including anxieties over the messaging of games such as *Tomb Raider* and *Hitman: Absolution*, our horror in the wake of the bullying campaign against feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian, close scrutiny of game journalism and a groundswell of demand that our industry both employ and market games to a more diverse array of people.

Fundamentally, these conversations are really about roles: the role of the press, the role of women, the role of marketing, the role of the community. Debates about sexism, the homogeny of triple-A games and the future of the retail blockbuster, as well as calls for change (and the backlashes against them) can be distilled down to issues of who we are and who we want to become as an industry and as a community.

Some people see games as lands to rule; others simply see a way to play. Some see art, and some see a business designed to crown hits – the list goes on. That's why I've begun to revise my ideas about identity crisis as regards our community of gamers and creators. It's a misnomer. We know who we are and what we want. It's just we aren't all the same creature; we don't all want the same thing.

Some of us increasingly recognise our work and our community far better in a toy store or at a community boardgaming night than in a GameStop. Some want to change the world; others would appreciate the chance to make gleeful guns-and-aliens sequels for the rest of their lives without continually being told they're part of a cultural disease. Some fear the decline of triple-A retail, while others would embrace it. Philosophies and cultural values in development splinter and clash.

We've been talking for ages about the democratisation of gaming, but the tension we're currently experiencing is far deeper and more complex than the irrelevance of labels like 'core' or 'casual'. The meaning of 'gamer' itself threatens to dissolve completely.

> We might have all come from the same place, but we're growing apart, as mature people do

We might have all come from the same place once, but we're growing apart, as mature people do when they finish adolescence. It's been hard, because people are frightened. Change is unnerving, especially for those who identify themselves as gamers because they want, or even need, a safe house.

You could even say that the earliest games were born from an identity crisis – from the visions of people who believed we could take on other selves, shape alternate worlds and then visit them. Much of the core spirit of gaming lies in the fact that we all want to feel strong, to feel like heroes, which might suggest that maybe we feel unsure of how heroic we are in our day-to-day. And it might imply that for some of us this world isn't quite right, isn't quite enough.

In many of our childhoods, perhaps that fascination with the invisible caused us some pain and loneliness. Or maybe it was that pain that led us to palm along some theoretical wall in the hopes of finding a curtain between this world and a universe of the fantastic. Who can say? But through it all, whether we aspired to create, articulate or simply to enjoy, games and the community around them were our safe haven. A place where we could always be, as Raph Koster often puts it, the "wizards". We made the rules in our own precious kingdoms.

But the foundation of games is bigger than secret languages, hidden forts and obsessive fandom. It's the spirit of play itself. Technology's relatively new, but the idea of playing games to bond, to learn and to stimulate is as old as life. Videogames owe their heritage in part to the unusually curious and devoted, and probably even to the ostracised and the strange. But in equal part, we owe a debt to the concept of play as communal language, as great teacher and as social utility.

Some perhaps understandably long for a child's age, a time when you could simply bounce off the head of a Goomba without having to feel socially responsible, and play without worrying about the ethics of messaging or whose feelings might be at stake. Some people long to see games go further, others passionately believe in letting them be as they are.

But in a year where the fear of change came up hard against the demand for change, perhaps it's time to accept we're not all part of the same community any more. We've grown so great that we are straining the little umbrella we once so loyally shared. Maybe content creators could be more creative, less defensive and more receptive if they didn't feel browbeaten by the social and financial pressure to be all things to all people.

None of us, whether we write about games or make them, can be all things to everyone any more – so what if we just stopped trying? Amid the present wealth of new business and funding models, it's finally possible. In the year ahead, perhaps we can find opportunity in among the crises.

*Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media*

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BRIAN HOWE

# You're Playing It Wrong

As the rest of **Edge** sorts out the top 50 developers, YPIW gets the task of toe-tagging the bottom 50

**50-41. DISHONOURABLE MENTIONS:** Thunderdog, Ninjatoad, Bubblegoat, Starduck, Snarkhog, Candyhorse, Battlebird, Ticklefish, Chubbyshark, Sumowolf – your names suck.
**40. CREATIONISM SOFTWARE:** Notable for shoddy Bible-themed knock-offs like *Tomb Riser*, *Sonic The Mennonite* and *Pokémoses*.
**39. TITAN INTERACTIVE:** Acquired the rights to Marvel Comics icon Professor X. Made a platformer.
**38. MANIAC STUDIOS:** Suffers from high talent turnover due to 130-hour weeks and overtime pay in the form of energy drinks.
**37. FACSIMILE DESIGNS:** Its attempt to copy *America's Army* in collaboration with the US Postal Service was met with indifference.
**36. ATTRACTIVE GAMES:** To keep payroll down, recruits all programmers straight out of school – cosmetology school.
**35. VISIONARY ENTERTAINMENT:** Tragically ahead of its time, went bust trying to develop games for the rotary-dial phone.
**34. REFLECTION GAMING:** Pushed the 'secondperson shooter', which never took off.
**33. XD3:** As many of its competitors adopted Unreal, tried to mask its broken engine by releasing *Journey To The Centre Of The Code*.
**32. ENIGMA:** Once a giant of licensed games, ruinously optioned The Criterion Collection and made a ponderous MMORPG based on Ingmar Bergman's The Seventh Seal.
**31. MONKEY FACTORY:** Cursed by its own sensibleness in an insensible genre, it made point-and-click adventure games with logical solutions no one thought to try.
**30. 33 BOTTLES:** Dragged down by a CEO rumoured to believe game mechanics are implemented via magical rites.
**29. SUPER FLY STUDIOS:** Notorious for trying to use a Kickstarter campaign to fund a mini-doc for a larger Kickstarter campaign.
**28. VIRTUAL PLAYGROUND:** Crushed by a class-action lawsuit after releasing a figure skates peripheral for *Oksana Baiul's Pro Skater*.
**27. PHILATELIST HQ:** Its line of stamp-collecting games became popular as a deterrent to bad behaviour in public schools.
**26. GRADUAL REVOLUTION:** Seems to think a release date is the day when you issue a press release announcing delays.
**25. TESSERACT PHOENIX:** Employees complain its HR dept is staffed by basilisks.
**24. ROCKIN' ROLE TECHNOLOGIES:** Famed for the failed *Ska Band* franchise; gamers declined to play endless quarter and eighth notes on a single-buttoned guitar.
**23. INFOLANDCOM:** Predicted the Power Glove was the future of gaming. Wound up with warehouses full of unsold Power Scarves.
**22. SILICON CONQUISTADORS:** Squandered millions trying to bring next-gen graphics to Tiger LCD handhelds.
**21. GLOBAL DEVELOPMENTS LTD:** All decisions are dictated by upper management, many of whom are buckets with mean faces drawn on set on brooms in Italian suits.
**20. ZILCH:** As the rest of the industry moved on to graphical interfaces, this text-game dev went the other way, embracing hexadecimal.
**19. INFODATACOM:** Produced compelling titles, but all for the Apple Pippin.
**18. SELDOMSOFT:** Bankrupted by trying to revive *Leisure Suit Larry* as an all-ages series.
**17. TOTEM GAMES:** Its games were so hard that, until the Game Genie, nobody realised they were three minutes long.
**16. TEAM5AXIS:** Experiments in axonometric perspective resulted in game environments requiring a graphing calculator.
**15. UNDERCOOKED:** Seems to have lost the will to live after a Digital Crafts merger.
**14. DIGITAL CRAFTS:** May actually be some kind of vampire hive mind.
**13. GOGOGAMES:** Signed a 20-year exclusivity deal with the Nokia N-Gage.
**12. BLOOD PUNCH GAMES:** Sadly, the whole design team was institutionalised after focus groups demanded an open-world side-scrolling shooter with dating-sim elements.
**11. GEO NEO:** Fought the Neo Geo, a cabinet that housed six interchangeable cartridges, with the Geo Neo – one cartridge that came with six cabinets.

18. Seldomsoft: Bankrupted by trying to revive Leisure Suit Larry as an all-ages series

**10. SOMEINDIECOMPANY:** Missing the point of *BioShock*'s success, grafted a generic shooter onto a macroeconomic strategy game based on the work of Friedrich Hayek.
**9. TINYSOFT:** A reverse halfway house leading from a game development career to divorce and type-2 diabetes.
**8. DENIALWARE:** Refused to admit that its games caused not only seizures, but also alopecia and rickets.
**7. JAPAN:** Their games suck, according to a guy who almost killed himself making *Fedora*.
**6. YOUR LITTLE COUSIN:** Yes, he's only like six, but his *LittleBigPlanet* levels are crap.
**5. BERNIE MADOFF:** Massively defrauded investors; never released a single game.
**4. SUICIDE STUDIOS:** Very high turnover.
**3. CTHULHU:** Less of a game company than a malevolent cosmic entity out of nightmare.
**2. FÜHRERSOFT:** Before turning to monstrosity, he was a frustrated developer.
**1. NSTORM:** Making *Elf Bowling* once is an accident. Making it twice is a declaration of war against humanity.

*Brian Howe writes about books, games and more for a variety of publications, including Pitchfork and Kill Screen*

#250




THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH




# Mapping is mastery

A big part of what captured our imagination while playing *Dead Space* was the sense of being trapped on the Ishimura. Bounded by the starship's thick hull, the horror always feels close, and its rooms and holds are laid out in a design that you can comprehend – the flight deck here, the bridge there. While *Dead Space*'s path is linear, it's also logical, your understanding of the Ishimura's geography giving you the sense that you have some degree of participation in your fortunes.

This idea lies at the centre of Adam Foster's *Half-Life 2* mod series, *Minerva*, created in part as a criticism of the original's level design, which he called "a series of unconnected boxes". *Minerva* has the spatial logic of the real world, making you crisscross your own path as you traverse a small island Combine base, and then travel down deep beneath it. Walking around, through and then over a structure allows you to grasp its form, and plugs into why we enjoy exploring videogames – mastering an environment by mapping it in our heads.

Being made up of many floating platforms, *BioShock: Infinite*'s (p42) city doesn't have the obvious peripheries of the Ishimura's hull or *Minerva*'s shore, but being able to see its districts far above or below grounds you, helping you understand where you're going and how it relates to where you've been before. Columbia contrasts with *BioShock*'s Rapture, which does exactly what Foster criticised *Half-Life 2* for. Sprawling across the seabed, Rapture doesn't make much spatial sense, its living quarters and shopping districts feeling arbitrary as you're funnelled through them without a sense of how they fit together. You're no freer to choose your own path in Columbia, but you feel as if you have more involvement, something that comes from your grasp of its map. As Miles Davis once said, "Knowledge is freedom and ignorance is slavery." In Columbia, you might have no choice, but you know where you are.

## MOST WANTED

**Metal Gear Rising** 360, PS3
A hugely promising bout of hands-on previews has allayed fears that this was 'just' going to be *Bayonetta* with some vague nods to Kojima's *MGS* mythology. Nope, Platinum looks to have absorbed *Metal Gear* lore, but added its own panache with deep melee combat.

**Prison Architect** PC
Introversion's jail management sim is deep into alpha testing and, after a successful showing at Minecon, designer Chris Delay has added a bunch of new features, including fire engines (for those pesky post-riot infernos) and a more intuitive way of building rooms.

**Metro: Last Light** 360, PC, PS3
Set in the Russian sewer system and tube network at the end of humanity, *Metro: Last Night* is a beacon of survival-horror malignance. Its precursor, *Metro 2033*, was sullied by both poor AI and some limiting structural issues, but *Last Light* looks to have got those sussed.

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# BIOSHOCK INFINITE

Open and resplendent. Xenophobic and violent. Welcome to Columbia

| | |
|---|---|
| **Publisher** | 2K |
| **Developer** | Irrational Games |
| **Format** | 360, PC, PS3 |
| **Origin** | US |
| **Release** | March 26 |




Whereas Rapture's civil war was all but over at the time of *BioShock*, Columbia's civil war is raging, and both sides have an interest in Booker and Elizabeth









RIGHT **The Bucking Bronco Vigor is like the Telekinesis plasmid crossed with Cyclone Trap. A wave of energy shoots forth from Booker's hands, launching any foes it comes into contact with skywards**

Goodness, doesn't Booker DeWitt look dashing? The changes aren't obvious, but *BioShock Infinite*'s lead has had a subtle makeover since we saw him last. His expression is more resolute, his hair less floppy, and his muscles strain against an outfit that makes American Victoriana look supremely fashionable. He needs to look the part, of course, since he's a more fully drawn character than *BioShock*'s blank slate.

Our first proper three-hour journey through Columbia is also the first opportunity to spend some quality time with Booker, and to gain a measure of how much impact a fully voiced player character with a backstory and motivation of his own will have on the series. After being dropped off at a suspiciously familiar lighthouse at the start of the game, we discover Booker's quest to save Elizabeth has a selfish motivation. Unspecified figures are hunting him for unknown deeds, but if he saves the girl, reads a note scrawled near a masked and mutilated body found in the lighthouse, then the debt will be wiped clean. This isn't just Columbia's story, then, nor is it purely Elizabeth's – DeWitt is known to certain key figures within the city, while infrequent dream sequences transport him to a monochrome office where an unseen figure bangs thunderously upon the door.

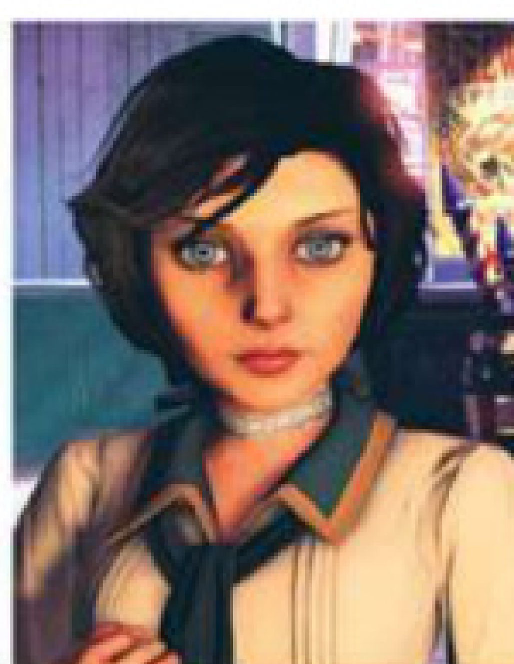
"What's interesting about Booker is that you both know him, but he's also a bit of mystery to you," explains creative director **Ken Levine**. "That's why you see his office. Part of it's a narrative element: a flashback, or dream, or something to that effect. But some of it is a way to fill you in on Booker. And as you go through [Columbia], you learn a bit more about him. He's another layer, another world you're exploring."

It's Columbia we've come for, of course, the floating city in the sky that parallels and mirrors Irrational's last piece of high-concept urban development. Like Rapture, Columbia is an isolationist utopia explicitly shaped by one man's guiding hand and vision. Unlike Andrew Ryan's city, however, Columbia is a city state that's been built along fervently nationalist and evangelical lines. Rather than a Libertarian paradise, this is a twisted version of the America that Fox News commentators pine for and lament. It's also devoutly and explicitly Christian; Booker must be baptised before he can truly enter the city, where hot dog stands and angelic statues of the founding founders line the dazzlingly clean neoclassical streets. But it's not quite America as a turn-of-the-century New Englander would recognise it. The horses drawing its carriages are mechanised contraptions powered by an energy source that appears to be fulfilling a similar role to Rapture's ADAM.

***What Columbia isn't is a whitewashing of history. Racism is an overt theme***

What Columbia isn't, however, is a nostalgic whitewashing of history. Racism is an overt theme in *Infinite*: black men and women work menial roles, mixed-race couples are pilloried, and preacher-cum-prophet-cum-dictator Father Zachary Comstock talks without irony about the 'white man's burden' while espousing drastic interventionism. By the time *Infinite* takes place, Columbia has seceded from the Union following Comstock's uncalled for and bloody intercession in the Chinese Boxer rebellion. Levine has stressed that *Infinite*'s exploration of themes raised by the polarised nature of contemporary US politics is coincidental, but that doesn't change the fact that the thematic core here feels unusually tied into the zeitgeist.

**More practically, Columbia** is an intriguing space to explore. *BioShock*'s boxy, modular level design makes an elegant kind of sense when you see the buildings float in and out of position, while the open spaces coupled with the grapple hook and the skyrail system give combat a dynamic flow that Rapture's battles lacked. Irrational still hasn't cracked the art of satisfying guns, but Booker's Sky-Hook is generously magnetic, pulling you towards the tracks at considerable range. It feels more like magic than gadgetry, but it does allow you to outflank and double back on Columbia's denizens at high speed.



## Double act

Irrational has clearly worked hard to make Elizabeth anything but a burden. Once Booker rescues her, she's a constant presence. Rather than needing to be protected, however, she keeps out of the way during battle. Outside of it, she can pick locks, help solve environmental puzzles, and scavenge for ammo and supplies. She's hardly going to qualify as a positive feminist icon – she's both a damsel in distress and Booker's beautiful assistant, after all – but she's intelligent and endearing, her conversations with Booker during downtime helping to further draw both their characters and make more sense of the world.



The lone star on the city flag is a clever touch – highlighting its pro-American fervour and reflecting its relationship with the Union. It's not clear whether the Civil War happened in the *BioShock* universe




When Elizabeth first meets Booker, she whacks him over the head with a copy of The Principles Of Quantum Mechanics. It's an economical way of showing that she's a resourceful and well-read character

Vigors really are the Plasmid clones they've always appeared to be, right down to the cheery advertising that accompanies them. Every one we try has a parallel in Rapture – and since our demo cuts out just before we get to face one of *Infinite*'s more substantial foes, we don't really get to put them to test. Hold the fire button and you can set various flavours of proximity-mine-like trap à la *BioShock 2*, but since this first stretch of the game contains no Big Daddy-style, player-instigated encounter, we never feel a need to prepare the ground.

Surprisingly, considering her role as a VIP to be escorted, it's Elizabeth who enlivens combat with fresh powers. As well as tossing ammo Booker's way at crucial moments, she can open dimensional rifts and summon useful level furniture – such as turrets and Sky-Hook grapple points – out of the void.

More than *BioShock*, however, *Infinite* is about the moments when the fighting stops. Rapture had a story to tell, of course, but it was a tale pieced together after the fact as you picked over the corpse of a ruined city. Columbia might be on the verge of collapse, but it's still flying, with an uneasy populace going about their lives. The game's prologue, for instance, is a combat-free, 45-minute tour of the floating city's carnivals and boulevards, and it's far from the only time that you'll see Booker lower his gun.

In a place less interesting, in a series with less of a pedigree, these moments could perhaps be self-indulgent. But Irrational has earned them. The parallels and contrasts between Rapture and Columbia are intriguing, and *Infinite* coyly invites you to make direct comparisons. The most important change, however, is simple: Columbia is alive. ■

## Q&A
### Ken Levine
Creative director, Irrational Games



**There are more quiet and exploratory moments here. Why the change of pace?**
Sometimes you have the option to bring your gun back into it. So there's times [when] you'll have an option. And that was something that we showed at E3 and it was important to us to follow through on. It entailed a lot of work. Having a game where you walk into a room and everyone shoots at you is easier than a game where that doesn't happen, which is easier than a game where it might happen. That's the most complicated [scenario]: when it might happen. But we thought it was really important to tell the story of that world – to have the bullets not always blazing, but also not to be going to cutscenes. I think cutscenes tell the player: 'Sit back, the game is done for a while; just watch the story.' I'm not a person who says there's one way to do a game, but we chose this as our cross to bear. I think people like the stories in our games because of the consistency of the experience.

**There are more scripted narrative moments as well…**
Because the world is alive, and you're with somebody – I mean, that's the primary difference, right? Rapture was a graveyard. If you look back at the amount of things you learned about the world in *BioShock 1* versus *Infinite*, there's a ton more information coming at you. You're learning a lot of information: who you are, why you're there. In the first game, you're just a guy crashing on a plane. At least, that's what you think. There's no goal; you just happen to crash. There's nobody alive, so there's a lot less story. I would say that the amount of narrative is many, many times the first game. But our goal is to keep you in the flow. I think it helps the pace [to have story scenes]. There's a lot more mix in this game.

**You've worked hard to make Elizabeth feel helpful. Was that difficult?**
Yeah, if you're a gamer you know what the words 'escort mission' mean to you. That's a never a good thing. I tried at the end of *BioShock*; there's sort of an escort mission, but I thought I was cleverly avoiding it because she could respawn out of those events. Lo and behold, no good. We knew there was a narrative story we wanted to tell. One of the members of the team, Tim Austin, had a background in human behaviour. And he said the moment the player feels Elizabeth is a burden, that's the moment we lose them for her. She's there as a partner, but she does have her own view on the world that isn't always in alignment with yours.

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# CRYSIS 3

## Crytek's radically reworked New York City is a land of opportunity

| | |
|---|---|
| **Publisher** | EA |
| **Developer** | Crytek |
| **Format** | 360, PC, PS3 |
| **Origin** | Germany |
| **Release** | February |

Prophet's threat meter spikes when enemies are nearby. Despite being wrapped in nano tech worth billions, a squad can take him down quickly if you don't know how to use it

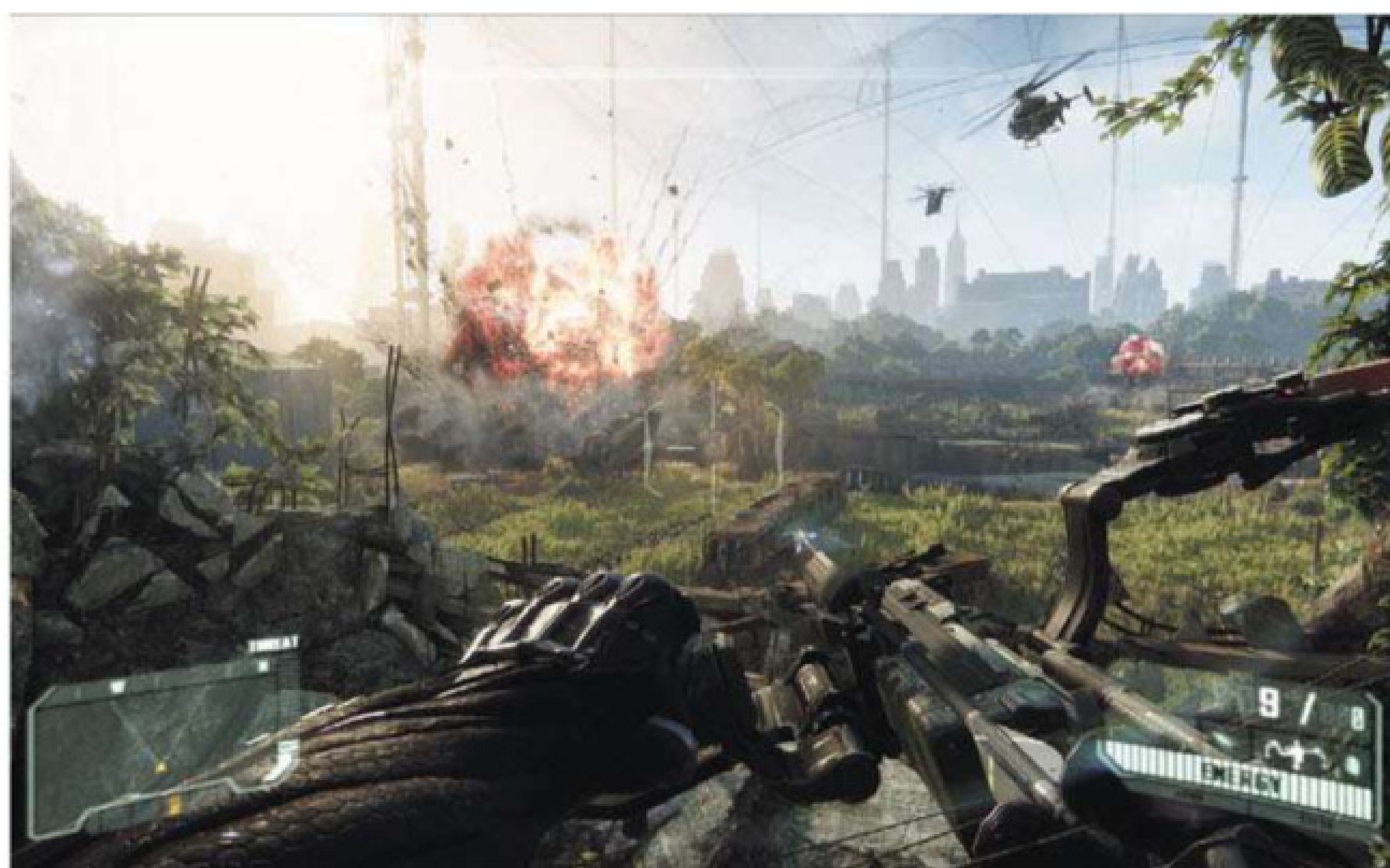




CRYSIS 3



RIGHT **It's a beautiful-looking game. The most noticeable distinction we can see between our PC and console demos is an overabundance of motion blur in the latter.**
BELOW-RIGHT **Bows are becoming ubiquitous in games – though few have quite as much functionality as this. As well as armour-penetrating and explosive arrows, players can also fire electrified bolts into pools of water**



With great power comes great paralysis. This is our guilty secret when it comes to playing *Crysis*. The suite of options and approaches made possible by the Nanosuit aren't empowering, they're calcifying. When chucking explosive barrels at tanks is as viable an option as quietly stabbing every last enemy in the throat, it can often be a struggle to decide what to do. *Crysis 3* can't solve the problem – which derives from the very freedom Crytek is trying to offer – but it has a valiant go at rendering it irrelevant, introducing scenarios that force you to think on your armour-clad feet alongside objectives that allow for a more deliberate approach.

It's partially down to the environment, a post-apocalyptic New York that manages to be more organic, surprising and visually stimulating than *Crysis 2*'s strictly urban jungle, even as it retains the semi-open combat bowl structure. More than just another time-neglected city in need of a good going over with some pesticide and a large pair of shears, the sci-fi backstory of the Liberty Dome allows it to be both a recently abandoned metropolis and vibrant paradise at once. Individually, both settings are tired, but *Crysis 3*'s unrestrained mixing of the two – Chinatown has turned into thick, partially submerged swampland – still manages to engage, even after 2012 saw *Prototype 2* tear up Manhattan again, and *Far Cry* return to the tropical island setting Crytek first crafted.

**It's *Crysis 2*** that our demo most recalls, however, with a shootout set in a dilapidated train yard. After we emerge from some astonishingly well-lit and detailed tunnels, causing us to speculate about the contents of the monolithic rig we're playing the demo on, we find ourselves in a scenario that could have been ripped straight from the second game in the series. Cell mercenaries are prowling between the train tracks and along the catwalks of a hangar, and it's left entirely to our discretion how they're going to die.

The Nanosuit's functionality – a heavy duty armour mode, some active camouflage, visors and super strength – is all but identical to *Crysis 2*, but a hi-tech bow is here to provide a dash of variation to combat. The ability to fire arrows without breaking cloak makes for a weapon that feels built for stealth rather than direct encounters, but multiple arrow types should mean it's a flexible tool. On that note, so should the ability to flick between three distinct draw speeds and subsequent shot strengths, a typical example



## Sizzle reel

Clearly aware that its city is *Crysis 3*'s best feature, Crytek is producing a series of films designed to showcase its districts, the so-called Seven Wonders Of Crysis 3. With Book Of Eli co-director Albert Hughes heading production, the Seven Wonders are a series of shorts fusing machinima with gameplay footage. The first clip we see is a brisk, snappy piece of action that shows off the capabilities of the Nanosuit in a free-flowing and creative manner that we can never quite achieve ourselves. Of course, *Crysis 3* isn't the only thing being showcased – we're sure the shorts are designed to shine the spotlight on CryEngine 3 as well.



Being stalked by the Ceph is more unsettling than genuinely threatening. We opt for a combination of high ground and infrared vision to pick them out in the grass, though sneaking through may have worked

of *Crysis* offering a potentially intimidating level of customisation.

One manner in which *Crysis 3* seems to diverge from its predecessor is in the steady application of pressure on players. High in the rafters of our particular combat bubble is an automatic turret that forced us to keep moving, even on normal difficulty. When we returned for a second pass on a higher setting, it made open conflict near impossible, forcing us to engage the Nanosuit's cloak to take out the turret before mopping up nearby soldiers. It's in these moments – when indecision is swapped for improvised snap decisions – that *Crysis 3* is at its most thrilling.

And it's precisely this feeling that's engendered by the subsequent set-piece, which sees the fighting spill outside into the thick, grassy yard. What happens next is a direct lift from Jurassic Park, but no less exciting for that, as the velociraptor-like Ceph Stalkers hunt us through the long grass. It's a neat reversal from predator to prey in a matter of moments, and one inverted again at the end of the chapter when we man a turret that fires explosive rounds and blow the aliens apart.

**When indecision is swapped for improvised snap decisions, Crysis 3 is at its most thrilling**

Clearly aware of the appeal of making sudden shifts between being hunter and hunted, Crytek has built a multiplayer mode around the theme, which initially sees a team of Cell operatives face off against a single cloaked player wielding the bow. Every player killed by this 'hunter' switches sides, though, so the remaining Cell troops find themselves slowly surrounded. It's a setup that means ratcheting tension for the Cell players as their numbers dwindle and cloaked assailants creep in from all sides.

If the concept is evocative of Predator, there's a dash of Aliens in the execution: a motion detector makes use of an unsettling, clanging alarm to warn troopers that the hunters are moving in, but refuses to divulge precisely where they are. We play the mode (called Hunters) on an airport-themed map that recalls *Modern Warfare 2*'s Terminal, albeit a version half absorbed by encroaching jungle, and battle lines naturally emerge as the Cell players retreat into the cover of buildings and hunters seek out the high ground. It's a strong showing for a multiplayer that otherwise looks set to replicate *Call Of Duty*'s perks-and-loadouts formula.

In both multiplayer and singleplayer, then, *Crysis 3* refuses to either reproduce or undo the massive shift in approach that marked the transition between the first game and its sequel. With its linear narrative and its semi-open combat bowls, *Crysis 3* is a refinement of the second game's divisive structure. So soon after *Far Cry 3*'s masterful take on an open-world jungle, this game is in danger of feeling restrictive. Still, any restriction seems to be accompanied by artfully constructed set-pieces in stunning environments. ■

## Q&A
**Rasmus Højengaard**
Director of creative development



**How did you decide upon the post-apocalyptic treatments you're giving the various districts of New York?**
It's actually a combination of gameplay needs and aesthetics… Let's take the example of the swamp in Chinatown. It's gritty, nasty, dark and scary. The story we're trying to push there is also a nasty piece of narrative. So we are always trying to make things contextually make sense. It's about making the player feel uncomfortable, making them feel empowered, making them scared – whatever makes sense at that point. Sometimes, of course, we look at Manhattan and think, 'This part is really cool, it'd make for a great game section,' but then we look and say, 'Well, that would fit this part of the story really well, so let's introduce it there.'

**The hi-tech bow and gameplay sections you've shown so far seem to be based on themes of hunting and predation.**
Sure, we really wanted to push the feeling of being a hunter and being empowered. On the other hand, sometimes you need to flip that around, so that what the player is comfortable with isn't really their friend any more; their tactics don't work. That's what the game is about. It's about adapting to the circumstances with the tools at hand.

**Why stick with the action bubble structure over the original's open world?**
We've tried to combine the two. There's more openness here than in *Crysis 2*, but less than in *Crysis*. A lot of our action bubbles are significantly bigger than what you saw in *Crysis 2*, and if you want to explore all of them you'll find there's an awful a lot to see. But we also wanted to tell a really good story, and that can be difficult when you don't know where the player is at certain times.

**What advantages does your setting offer from a level design perspective?**
Let's just take the airport level here: you have all these massive husks you can run around. Where would you normally find somewhere that looks like that? In the real world, it doesn't happen – it's water that's come in and destroyed it. So we can have those spaces in a way that makes sense. And the airport gives us geometry that you wouldn't always have in a non-urban environment. So the layout of the city really helps. But all of a sudden we can create a skybridge that's made of a big branch that would never be in a city. It gives us a lot of variety that would be very difficult to achieve in a game set in the real world.

Large but seamless, the cave is a beautiful space packed with hidden corners and calm pools. Each character has a themed section that's different, allowing for a broad stylistic mix

HYPE

# THE CAVE

## A journey to the centre of Double Fine's weird mind

| | |
|---|---|
| **Publisher** | Sega |
| **Developer** | Double Fine |
| **Format** | 360, PC, PS3, Wii U |
| **Origin** | US |
| **Release** | Early 2013 |





The knight is something of a scaredy-cat. There's a Wizard Of Oz-vibe to *The Cave* at times, given the esoteric cast and their very specific set of needs



*The Cave* is an adventure game, claims **Ron Gilbert**, but it feels strangely like a platformer. A side-on view and a jump button can go a long way in defining the feel of a title, and even the absence of precise jumping challenges can't change the fact that *The Cave* is a rather unusual hybrid.

You can control three characters (of a possible seven) in your journey through the cave, which lends itself to basic puzzles – one character might need to jump on a rope to move a counterweight blocking the path ahead. These physical conundrums are interspersed with more typical adventure game challenges, but the flowing traversal certainly distances *The Cave* from *Monkey Island*'s static screens. That said, it's not quite as far removed in its wit and charm.

**Like all of** Double Fine's output, *The Cave* has personality. Indeed, the cave quite literally has a personality, sardonically narrating the exploits of the characters who plumb its depths in the hope of finding their hearts' desires. Today we're playing the scientist, the hillbilly and a creepy pair of twins whose behaviour as a single unit is expedient and disconcerting. It's a weird mishmash of a party, perfectly showcasing the kind of contrasts and surrealism the game delights in.

With that in mind, it's not that much of a surprise when we stroll into a carnival deep underground. It's an area designed with the hillbilly in mind – you need his underwater breathing power in order to reach it, and were he not in the party it would be totally out of bounds (on our way here, for instance, we had to ignore a medieval castle that only the knight could enter).

The carnival is the kind of nonthreatening and amusingly detailed space that Double Fine does so well. Here the hillbilly must win five tickets if he's to buy a gift for the love of his life, and the puzzles derive from working out how to subvert the rigged attractions. Get a mage to turn a weightlifter's dumbbells invisible, for instance, and you can dupe the guess your weight machine operator into making the wrong estimate. There's a dark edge to the comedy, too; the hillbilly robs a child for his first ticket, and when an object of his affections rejects his advances, the player must take a shocking revenge.

***Physical conundrums are interspersed with more typical adventure game challenges***

In truth, *The Cave* seems a relaxed, simplistic puzzler. But as ever with Double Fine, it's being executed with an endearingly eccentric and individualistic streak. ■

## Q&A

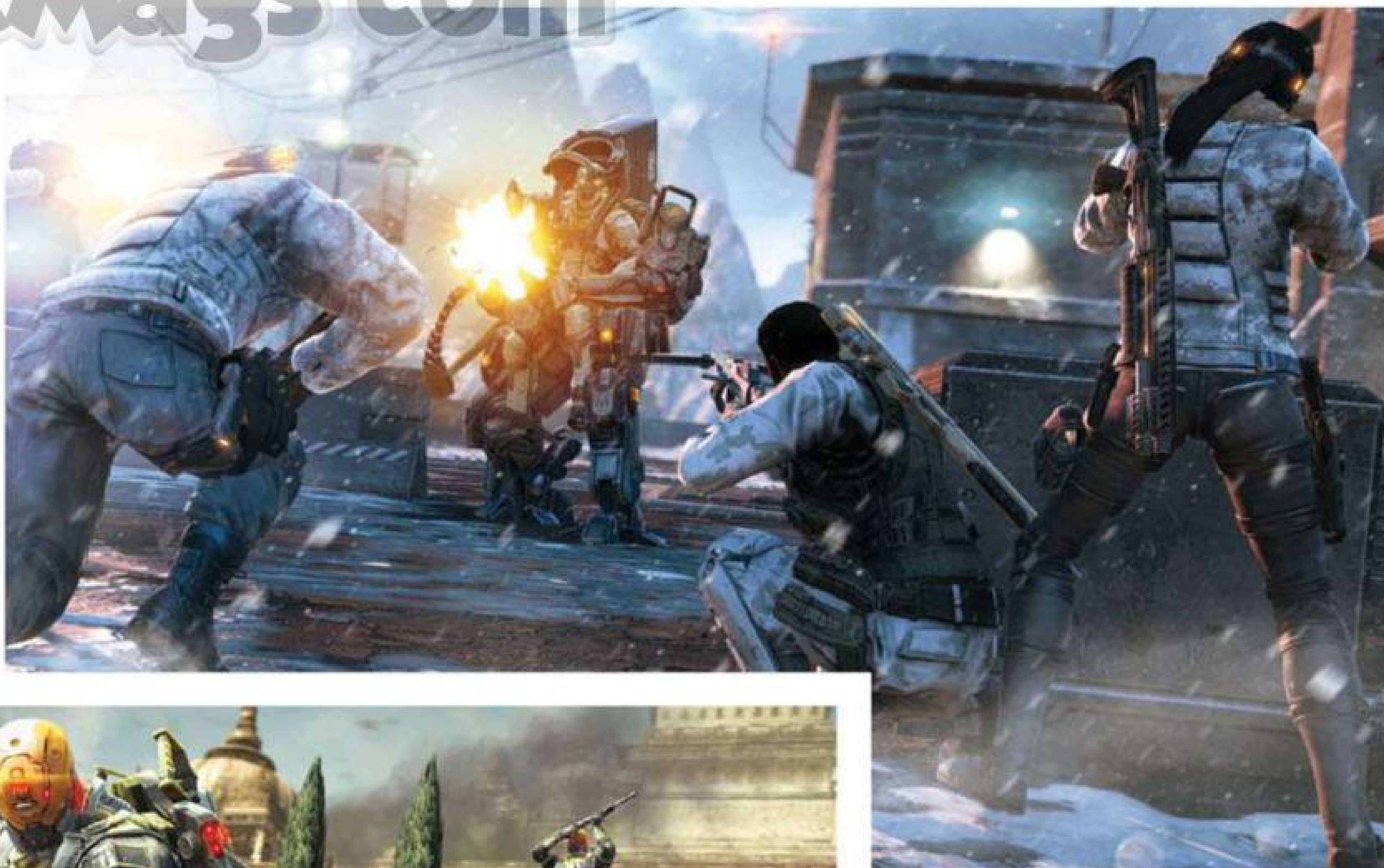
**Ron Gilbert**
Creator of The Cave, Double Fine



**Did you deliberately create a cast of stereotype-defying game characters? A female scientist, children, and so on.**
When I started, [I had] all these different characters on a white board in my office. I had about 30. And then we started for real, and the two other designers and I went through that list and we just started circling some and crossing off others. A clown? Who wants to be a clown? It took weeks. Two things were very important to me – they had to all be very weird and different, and there had to be an even split of male and female characters. The twins gave us an even split.

**Seamlessness seems important to you, with instant restarts and the absence of an inventory screen. Why is that?**
The seamlessness is very important to me on two levels. On one level, it's one of the reasons I've always objected to death in adventure games, because I never felt you should play the game, die, have to load the game, play the game, die, have to load the game and so on. There's a certain amount of immersion in being able to start playing the game and never come out of the game again that makes you just feel a lot more involved in that experience. The second part is that when I first played *World Of Warcraft*, I was just really blown away by the fact that there's no loading in the game. Once you enter the world, you can walk from one end to other of these continents and everything just seamlessly loads. I found myself a lot more involved in the world. *DeathSpank* was the same way: you have no loads, you just walk around. *The Cave* starts with a scene outside with the seven characters, and you'll never see a load screen the whole way through. It keeps people really immersed.

**What do you think the platforming brings to the game?**
I didn't think this back in the day when I was playing adventure games – I never really thought about the fact that's kind of boring to walk around the world, that Guybrush is incapable of running. But, you know, recently I've looked at the kind of games I like, and what's keeping gamers engaged these days. They're much more interested in that moment-by-moment gameplay. It's one of the things that adventure games have missed the mark on in [terms of] appealing to the modern gamer. So in *The Cave*, we wanted you to always be doing something fun. So if you were trying to solve a puzzle, one half of your brain was thinking about it while the other was running, jumping and moving.



RIGHT **These mechs take a long time to kill. We found ourselves taking the role of squad decoy, using our cloaking ability to lure the machine on a merry chase while our colleagues shot the weakpoint on its back.** BELOW **Melee takedowns are brutal on both sides. It's hard to imagine them working with *Fuse*'s old *Overstrike* style, given that it was conceived with far more of a stealth focus**



H Y P E

# FUSE

## Guns and chums come out to play in Insomniac's new shooter

| | |
|---|---|
| **Publisher** | EA |
| **Developer** | Insomniac |
| **Format** | 360, PS3 |
| **Origin** | US |
| **Release** | March |



**There's humour to the dialogue in *Fuse*, though for the most part a gruff tone pervades. Using agents instead of military grunts keeps the Oscar Mikes to a minimum**

While the AI is solid, teammates seem to focus most of their energy on not getting killed. Complicated plans require human allies to be put into effect

First it was *Overstrike*, and now it's *Fuse*. It seems appropriate that Insomniac's first game to appear on a non-Sony console has suffered a crisis of identity, but it's still disappointing to have watched it slough off a visual style that recalled *Team Fortress 2* and exchange it for something with less flair. It was necessary, argues **Ted Price**, as part of a rejig that moved the alien substance Fuse to the centre of the gunplay as well the narrative. Freed of the stylised nature of the previous approach, *Fuse* is better able to communicate the violent outcomes of its creative weapons.

There's certainly a sense of impact, since even ordinary pistol and machine gun bullets lodge in enemy jugulars with great crimson spurts. There's still stylisation here, then, a sort of hyper-real grittiness that stops the violence from becoming genuinely shocking. Still, it's clear Insomniac has traded the vibrancy and distinct nature of its first pass to ensure its guns feel right.

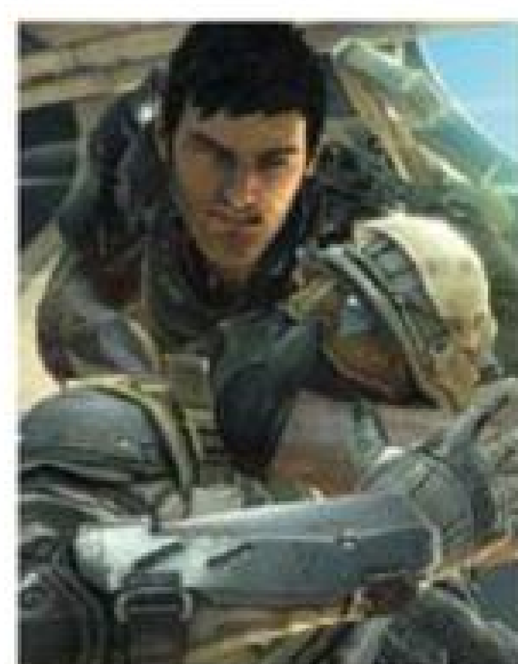
Those weapons are all-important. *Fuse* takes a set of four, high-concept firearms and distributes them evenly among its squad. Dalton Brooks can use his to raise a one-way 'magshield' to defend against incoming fire while the squad returns its own. Naya Deveraux and Isabelle Sinclair, meanwhile, have guns with powerful area-of-effect effects, drawing enemies into a singularity and crystallising them in place, respectively. Jacob Kimble is the sniper, but the bolts fired from his crossbow can be detonated once they're embedded in walls, armour or flesh.

The weapons, as well as a host of secondary traits and abilities, make sense in a game designed for co-op. What surprises us, however, is how much we enjoy going alone. There's a faint realtime strategy feeling to hopping between characters as we assault a snow-covered base in Pakistan, and the ability to change playstyle on a whim helps mitigate the fact that – generic pick-ups aside – each character is limited to their signature weapon. Still, as *Fuse*'s story of camaraderie and jointly overcoming seemingly impossible odds will no doubt expand upon, cooperation is the heart of *Fuse*. It's a fact made abundantly clear by the way one player bleeding out spells a restart for everyone. And by the endless waves of foes.

**Never have we** attacked a such a well-defended installation, as a private army's worth of troops and mechs pours out in wave after wave. It feels needlessly attritional until we realise the overwhelming odds are a way of enforcing collaborative play. Deveraux's vortices pull enemies into groups for Kimble to pick off with his crossbow, while the cover provided by Brook's magshield lets Sinclair freeze enemies trying to flank us. That's the plan, anyway, but some scrappy teamwork leads to more than a couple of tries.

Our initial forays in Echelon are even less successful. This is *Fuse*'s wave-based mode, but Price is keen to stress that unlike Horde, Firefight et al, it's a mode that attempts to put players on the offensive, with objectives to drag them out of cover. "Wave-based modes have been around for a long time; we're used to playing defensively, defending a position or just staying alive. What we do is, we want players to work together to go on the attack," he explains. It's a mode that certainly punishes a lack of teamwork, but it's still unmistakably a variant of Horde.

*Fuse* has big guns and big explosions, but there's a thought-out logic and interplay between its components. It no longer looks the part, but the spirit of *Ratchet & Clank* is still alive at Insomniac.



## Joining forces

Tweaks to the feel of the guns might explain the visual overhaul, but the name change from *Overstrike* to *Fuse* occurred to better stress the importance to the story of Fuse, an alien substance that has led to all sorts of advancements in the field of blowing things up. The team's weapons are powered by the stuff, and collecting enough Fuse Points by downing enemies lets you activate Fusion attacks, which temporarily power up the entire squad's abilities. Meanwhile, the plot seems to involve our team of mercenaries chasing terrorists who presumably would also like to be allowed to use Fuse to violently kill other people.

Despite *Warface*'s modern military overtones, this is an arcade game at its heart, down to the 'coins' players purchase to gain extra continues in co-op

H Y
P E

# WARFACE

## Crytek's new experiment is an ultra-accessible FPS

**Publisher** Crytek, Trion Worlds
**Developer** Crytek
**Format** PC
**Origin** Germany
**Release** 2013

Graphically, *Warface* can compete with most retail shooters on high-end systems. It scales down dramatically, however, and will run on the average office PC at a push



*Warface* is a left-of-field proposition for Crytek, a developer best known for the enduring power of its development engines. It's a free multiplayer FPS that needs to set the performance bar low enough to gain traction in the Internet cafés of Asia, yet must still be able to compete with the big-budget shooters that dominate in the west. Having recently topped five million players in Russia, it's demonstrated it can do the former – can it go the rest of the way?

As a competitive shooter, *Warface*'s main reference point is *Call Of Duty*, but there's a little *Counter-Strike* in the way its maps encourage careful area clearance and generate firefights around chokepoints. Movement is slow and heavy, meaning that a poorly timed break from cover can leave you exposed, and encouraging liberal use of the sprint button. As a consequence, the majority of surprise encounters become quick-draw duels as both players stop dashing to bring their weapons to bear. *Warface* differentiates itself with a slide mechanic that allows the player to pass under obstacles or get behind cover by diving from a sprint into a frictionless butt-glide. This isn't a game that takes itself very seriously, and if the name wasn't proof enough then watching a man slide under a fence holding a primed grenade should drive the point home.

Free-for-all and team deathmatch behave according to type, and there's also an objective capture mode in which teams swap attack and defence roles. The game's offering in this regard is strictly functional – this is the FPS as a service, a suite of playstyles that support rather than challenge the basic idea of running around a box and shooting your friends.

Similar to Nadeo's free-to-play racer *TrackMania*, maps are drawn from themed asset packs. As such, players should be ready to see the same storage container, desert shack and burned-out car in a wide variety of different contexts. The upside of this is the speed with which Crytek can generate and iterate upon levels, which should enhance their variety and quality in the long term.

***Warface's main reference point is COD but there's a little Counter-Strike too***

Weapons are drawn from a similarly familiar pool – assault rifles and shotguns, SMGs, handguns and so on. You swap in a wide range of scopes, silencers and other attachments on the fly, a feature cribbed wholesale from *Crysis 2*. Gun feel is a mixed bag; some of the shotguns in particular suffer from underwhelming animation and audio, but the assault rifles and pistols tend to fare better. The most satisfying feedback comes from the red hit indicator that blooms in the centre of the screen after a successful shot – in many ways, *Warface*'s military bearing belies the coin-op sensibility that's lurking underneath.

This is most apparent in the game's co-op mode, a score-attack challenge that leads a small team of players through linear stages punctuated by boss battles. Enemies behave with the fidelity and grace of pop-up bandits, but the combo multiplier at the top of the screen encourages the idea that enemy soldiers are points waiting to be scored, not opponents to be taken seriously. The simplistic AI could limit the longterm viability of cooperative play, but the mode looks fit to serve its stated purpose, providing an alternative way into multiplayer FPS gaming for players unwilling to brave the competitive side straight away. This is reinforced by the way that co-op missions are doled out as MMOG-style daily challenges. They're framed as a diversion to be dipped into, rather than a game to be invested in.

**In the west,** *Warface* will launch alongside Gface, Crytek's proprietary social network. It won't be the first shooter with the support of a web app, but it's among the first to acknowledge the way that these kinds of games plug into the daily lives of the majority of players. Its *Time Crisis*-style co-op mode, its pared-down deathmatch arenas and even its name are expressions of the idea that, despite their allusions to real conflict, modern military shooters are the definition of mainstream. *Warface*'s potential comes from the way that this meshes with its business model – it may not push technological boundaries in the way that Crytek is known for, but as a lunchtime blaster with a low barrier to entry it nonetheless looks something like the future. ■

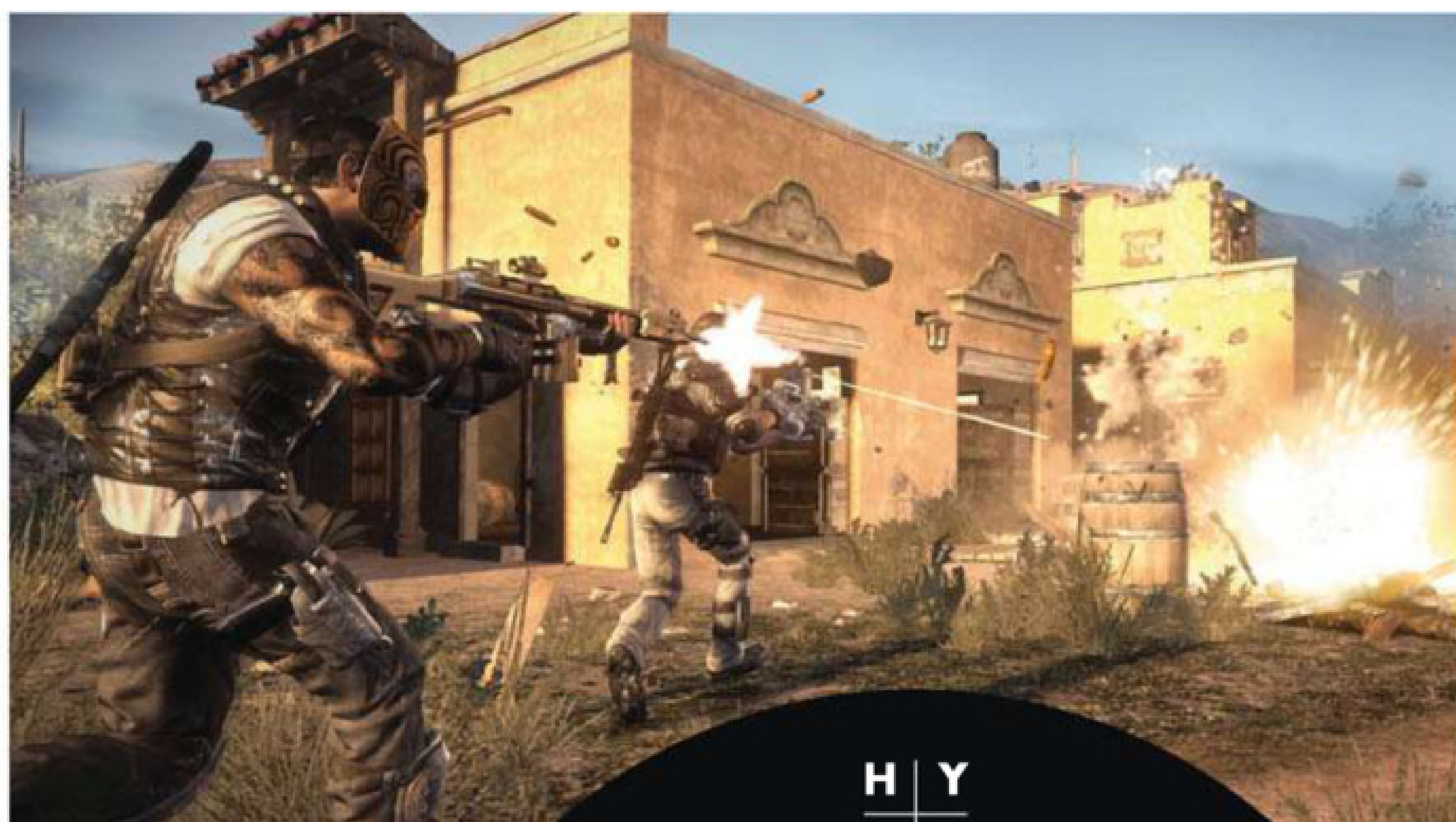


## Games as social spaces

Unlike in Asia, players in the west don't congregate in one space to play games together, which is one of the things that triggered Gface's development. "We wanted to create this online space because for us [games] have always been a social thing," says Crytek producer **Peter Holzapfel**. Gface, which looks and works remarkably similarly to Google Plus, is designed to meld playing the likes of *Warface* with all the other social things its players do, to fit games into a culture in which gaming is not necessarily a members-only hobby. "[Gface] is expanding those smaller circles into something that's more open, more global."

RIGHT The first game's operatives appear in non-playable form, symbolically passing the torch to the blanker slates who've replaced them. BELOW Alpha and Bravo work for the Trans World Operations PMC. Rather than being evil and faceless like before, this is a friendly multinational







H | Y
P | E

# ARMY OF TWO: THE DEVIL'S CARTEL

## There's blood on the sand in EA's demi-reboot

| | |
|---|---|
| **Publisher** | EA |
| **Developer** | In-house/Visceral |
| **Format** | 360, PS3 |
| **Origin** | US, Canada |
| **Release** | March 26 (US), 28 (UK), 29 (EU) |



Bravo's keener to start killing than Alpha, but both are less psychopathic than the previous game's pair of protagonists

The setting appears to have been realised with a genuine eye for detail, though whether the game will move out of soldier-filled compounds and into more urban environments isn't clear

The first pair of *Army Of Two* games thrust a not-particularly-likeable duo of testosterone-oozing frat boys into a variety of international hotspots, where these exemplars of good ol' privately contracted American justice proceeded to save the world by killing anyone who moved. *The Devil's Cartel*, meanwhile, takes a new pair of barely drawn tough guys and plonks them down into cartel-infested Mexico, where they appear to be killing anyone who moves. As reboots go, it's not so much radical as neoconservative.

That said, it's nice to play a thirdperson shooter not running on Unreal Engine 3. This is the latest EA project to make use of DICE's Frostbite engine, and though we're fairly certain that the *Battlefield* studio had the realtime destruction of buildings in mind when it created the tech, it turns out human beings can be torn apart pretty readily as well.

*The Devil's Cartel* is a gory, bloody game. Its enemies aren't punctured by bullets, they're ripped to pieces by them as new masked heroes Alpha and Bravo move through small cartel hideouts. It adds an appropriately visceral feel to the business of murder as business, but we doubt that any *Spec Ops: The Line*-esque introspection will be the pay off to the violence.

Rather than the aggro system of the previous game, which encouraged teamwork by allowing players to see how enemies' hostility was divided among the pair, Visceral and EA Montreal have opted for more straightforward positive reinforcement. "We've taken away things from previous games," says **Greg Rizzer**, producer at Visceral Games. "But we've added this layer of scoring, which is about you and I trying to rack up as much of those co-operative kills possible. A surprise flank, a tag team where you and I both attack at the same time: it's all rewarded now and it's really exciting."

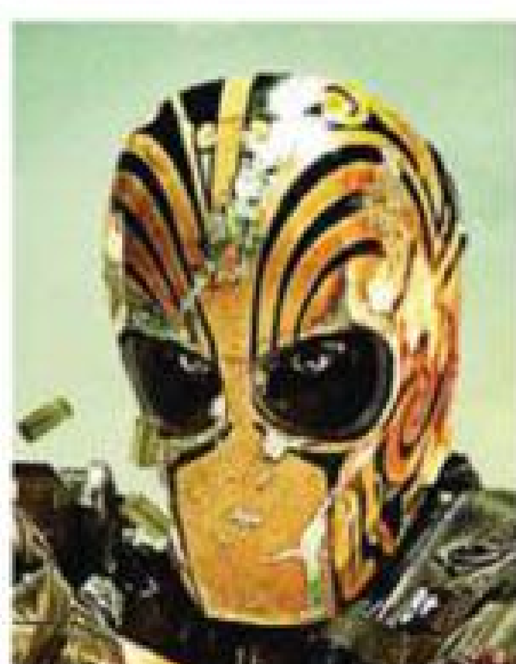
Earn enough points and players can then activate Overkill, a gory, time-slowing crescendo to a gunfight that lets both players target enemies at their leisure and with increased damage.

*The Devil's Cartel* is under no illusions as to the kind of experience it's offering. Its opening cutscene sees Alpha mock Bravo (or, quite possibly, Bravo mock Alpha) for requesting permission to engage an unsuspecting pair of cartel soldiers. Later on Bravo (or possibly Alpha) chides his partner for not realising that red barrels, when shot, are going to explode – "Red barrels *always* explode," he says.

**"We've been trying** to ensure that we're injecting humour into the game," explains Rizzer. "When we announced this game, and we said we were going to have a grittier tone, people were concerned. We want to do dialogue of a buddy cop nature."

That self-aware tone might well see *The Devil's Cartel* through to the credits if it can be maintained, though it could also sit uneasily with the studios' promises of a mature story worthy of the contemporary Mexico setting. A setting, of course, which saw *Call Of Juarez: The Cartel* sharply criticised. "We do get asked quite a bit about doing a game based on the drug cartels," says Rizzer. "The first thing to remember is that every single person in this game you take down is working for the cartel. They're pretty awful. Yes, there's some stuff that's from the headlines today, and we're aware of that, but this isn't a documentary."

We're sure that Visceral won't blithely stumble into a delicate situation and somehow make things worse. That is, after all, the job of its game's stars.



## Collateral damage

The customisation in *The Devil's Cartel* is tied to teamwork. Perform enough joint takedowns and flanks and, as a reward, you'll earn more cash that can be used on adjusting and improving your guns, or simply on buying new, ludicrous masks. While the game doesn't fully embrace the tactical potential of Frostbite 2's deformation ability, the environment is packed with deformable detail. Walls chip, wood splinters, and cars explode. Coupled with the violence, there are few games that convince as strongly when it comes to the impact of your bullets, which should certainly give players incentive to customise them.



HYPE

# MARVEL HEROES

## It's fan service on a massive scale, but does it achieve player service?

| | |
|---|---|
| **Publisher** | Gazillion Entertainment |
| **Developer** | Secret Identity Studios |
| **Format** | Mac, PC |
| **Origin** | US |
| **Release** | TBA |





The alternate costumes, such as Hulk's Maestro form, are crafted using all manner of arcane items from enemy drops

ABOVE **On the basis of trying its heroes' early powers, few seem specifically tuned to encourage team play, which is surprising given *Marvel Heroes*' multiplayer nature.**
RIGHT **As well as being set in locations familiar and otherwise, levels feature occasional incidental details, such as the sight of Eddie Brock becoming Venom in the initial prison breakout**



The screen can get busy, but the levels we've seen are often sprawling and less densely populated than this. They also start to feel samey quickly

Of course *Marvel Heroes* starts off with a prison breakout. It's an uninspiring way to set out its stall and present you with a smorgasbord of supervillains to click on. And yet if this *Diablo*-like action-RPG's introductory hours are anything to go by, it barely even lives up to the promise of its chosen shtick.

That time, after all, is spent trudging through a gloomy, partially destroyed prison, mopping up Hydra foot soldiers and then facing a series of perfunctory boss fights with apparently randomly chosen foes – first Living Laser, then Green Goblin, then Electro. There's little narrative infrastructure to tie all these scraps together, other than the understanding that all the villains are running wild. You're also reminded that the flat planes of an ARPG's levels are hardly the place to showcase the likes of Green Goblin's glider aerobatics. He's reduced instead to performing a series of bombing runs before hovering before you to be shot, punched, burned or stabbed until he falls over.

It's easy to criticise an ARPG for lacking tactical depth, but *Marvel Heroes'* opening struggles to demonstrate the need to use any of its heroes' Powers (AKA skills) beyond the standard attacks mapped to the left and right mouse buttons. A lot of the problem lies in a lack of the kind of audiovisual heft that brought a sense of physicality to *Diablo III*.

So, while clearly part of an anxious need to maintain all-ages appeal, Hulk's smashes do little to communicate his nature as one of the most powerful beings in the Marvel universe. His basic brawler design also fails to cash in on the character's innate ability to become more powerful as he gets angrier, other than the scant nod of an unlockable Power in one of his skill trees that boosts his strength stat as he takes damage. The failure to fully realise such an iconic part of this character's identity seems like a fundamental oversight. Still, Hawkeye works better, his arrows relating a clearer sense of damage, and his kick sending enemies sprawling, which even adds a little tactical choice to the action.



## City limits

*Marvel Heroes* melds its ARPG with an MMOG-style world, having you share many large and free-roaming areas with other players. Hell's Kitchen: Crumbling Brownstones is peopled by endlessly respawning punks and the odd boss to take down, usually with the kind of implacable health bar that demands a team approach. Lacking the crafted pacing of a designed level and the emergence of a randomly tiled one, its odd highlights come from the tiny details you may or may not discover as you pace its streets. A manhole cover spurs the appearance of ninjas, for instance, but there's little other motivation to explore.

*Marvel Heroes*, as its name suggests, focuses on hero collection rather than the careful development of just one. It's where its business model lies, too. At any time, you can bring up this free-to-play game's shop menu to buy yourself a new hero from a large collection of Marvel's greatest. And at any point during the game you can switch – after a short charging period – between previously purchased heroes. The payoff is never having to be locked into a specific character style, as well as plenty of fan service. But the potential downside, one that only extended play will truly reveal, is that no one hero will have a deep enough skill tree to maintain your interest over a long period.

**Your heroes' inventories** are shared, meaning that anything you pick up is accessible to all. It's as streamlined a feature as it is crafty – on picking up a pair of Hulk pants and knowing he's just a short purchase away, you're constantly being tempted. Moreover, your slots quickly get filled with ingredients for *Marvel Heroes'* costume crafting system, which unlocks fan-appeasing alternative appearances. But these mean, disappointingly, that you'll never see your character wearing the loot you pick up.

This design cashes in on Marvel fans' compulsion to collect 'em all, but once they've tapped their favourite heroes' collections, you wonder what will keep them going. The cynics among us might assume that it'll be more heroes to buy, and that would be a shame. ■




ROUND-UP

## DEAD SPACE 3

**Publisher** EA | **Developer** Visceral | **Format** 360, PC, PS3 | **Origin** US | **Release** February 5 (US), 8 (EU)



First co-op and then Kinect support? Visceral seems to enjoy trying the patience of hardcore *Dead Space* fans. Having revealed plans to implement Microsoft's motion control device, the studio was quick to point out it would be for voice controls. Players can shout 'use stasis', 'reload' and 'view inventory', and in co-op play, 'share ammo' or 'give health' when their partner's in trouble. Executive producer Steve Papoutsis claims the team also considered using the Kinect camera to take a photo of players during shock moments, but that didn't make it. Neither did a 'do karate chop action to dismember necromorph' feature. Shame.

## CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW – MIRROR OF FATE

**Publisher** Konami | **Developer** MercurySteam
**Format** 3DS | **Origin** Spain | **Release** March 5



With its opulent visuals and stirring score, *Mirror Of Fate* clearly wants to capture the cinematic grandeur of 2010's *Lords Of Shadow*, all while being on 3DS and a worthy precursor to that game's forthcoming console sequel. The latest trailer shows Gabriel Belmont's descendent, Trevor, preparing to destroy his vampiric forefather. Later, players will gain control of Trevor's son, Simon, resulting in a great big multi-generational revenge fest. Messy things, families.

## DISTANCE

**Publisher** Refract Studios | **Developer** In-house
**Format** Mac, PC | **Origin** US | **Release** Summer



The latest futuristic racer from the team behind *Nitronic Rush* blitzed through Kickstarter and is on course for a summer beta. Set in an open city crammed with obstacles and hidden paths, the idea is to survive as long as possible, customising your vehicle as you rush through the neon streets.

## FIRE EMBLEM: AWAKENING

**Publisher** Nintendo | **Developer** Intelligent Systems
**Format** 3DS | **Origin** Japan | **Release** February 4 (US), April (EU)




Intelligent Systems' dense, tactical RPG finally has a rough European release date almost a year after its arrival in Japan. Most of its core features have appeared in previous games in the series, but they're all welcome, from the chance to pair characters and breed children to its traversible world map.

## GODUS

**Publisher** 22Cans | **Developer** In-house
**Format** Android, iOS, Mac, PC | **Origin** UK | **Release** TBA



Peter Molyneux's 'reinvention' of the god game genre was struggling to hit its Kickstarter target – until Notch stepped in with his endorsement. Said to combine elements of *Dungeon Keeper*, *Black & White* and *Populous*, warring gods must make inhabitable environments for their teeny followers.

## STORYTELLER

**Publisher** Daniel Benmergui | **Developer** in-house
**Format** iOS, Mac, PC | **Origin** Argentina | **Release** Late 2013



In a fascinating mix of comic book and adventure game, *Storyteller* provides situations and goals, then gives you the components to construct a plot within a few frames. For a story about suicidal heartbreak, you might need to play a boy, a girl and a gravestone. It's cute, dark and ingenious.

## GOD MODE

**Publisher** Atlus | **Developer** Old School Games
**Format** 360, PC, PS3 | **Origin** US | **Release** 2013



Disgraced gods, jettisoned from Mount Olympus, compete in bloody shooting matches to earn reinstatement. That's the setup behind this RPG-shooter hybrid, featuring fourplayer co-op and a chunky upgrade system. You're accompanied by a spirit guide who refers to the underworld as, 'Hell in a Toga'.

## THE OFFICIAL

**Publisher** Tymon Zgainski |**Developer** In-house
**Format** PC | **Origin** UK | **Release** TBA



With a retro, flat-shaded polygon look, *The Official* is a firstperson adventure based around mundane office tasks – within a building that may or may not be an innocent corporate edifice. A trailer intercuts scenes of everyday work with subliminal glimpses of a noose above a chair. Sinister.

## DEAD OR ALIVE 5 PLUS

**Publisher** Tecmo Koei | **Developer** Team Ninja
**Format** Vita | **Origin** Japan | **Release** March 19 (US), March 22 (EU)



Team Ninja has done it again. The Vita version of its latest brawler has a firstperson Touch Play mode, which lets you fight by tapping your opponent where you want to hit them. More complex moves can be performed by pinching and swiping the screen. The mind boggles at what the team could have done with the rear touch pad. Meanwhile, a cross-platform option lets Vita fighters compete against PS3 owners, should they so wish.



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## GRID 2

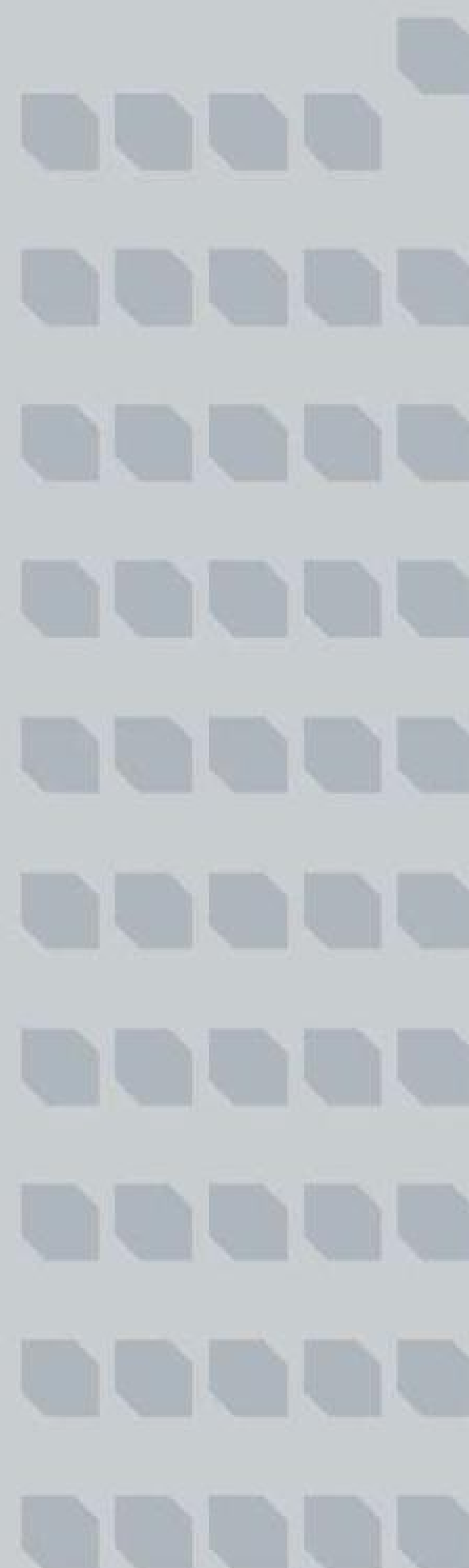
**Publisher** Codemasters | **Developer** In-house | **Format** 360, PC, PS3 | **Origin** UK | **Release** Summer



Codemasters is slowly leaking screenshots of its globe-trotting *Grid* sequel after two years in pre-production. Muscle car fanatics will enjoy the sight of Ford Mustang Boss 302s duelling through the Chicago night, while daytime shots of the Mustang Mach 1 and Nissan Silvia S15 reveal a new location: Barcelona. Alongside boasts of overhauled AI and damage, there are more intriguing additions. The optional LiveRoutes system dynamically alters a circuit on the fly, so that drivers never know what's coming around the next curve. The dev team is also collaborating with fan sites to create the in-game achievements.

EDGE

# DEVELOPER AWARDS 2013



Welcome to the Edge Developer Awards, a new, annual list of the best development studios in the world. Judged by **Edge**'s editorial team, the EDAs are not ranked by revenue, sales figures or review scores. There are no hard-and-fast criteria that every studio included needs to satisfy, but we know what we're looking for. We're interested in technical and creative ability, and in studios that realise the most involving and stimulating game worlds, whether that's through visual, audio or game design.

We're also looking for imagination – studios that bring new influences and themes to videogames, and those that experiment with giving players new ways of interacting with their virtual worlds. We're looking at the ingenuity displayed in creating enthralling experiences with finite development resources. And we're looking at studios that understand and engage with their audiences, and have the vision to know where games are going next.

Some of the studios we're highlighting here are vast, employing hundreds of people and making games on a similarly massive scale. Some comprise just a few staff. But all of them make games that reach out to their players and mean something to their lives. These are the best development studios on the planet today.



**www.bit.ly/TH8IQm**
Everything EDA, including your picks and dev favourites



Nathan Vella, co-founder and president of Toronto-based Capybara Games



Halfbrick's *Jetpack Joyride*



Jagex's *Transformers Universe*

## 50 Relic Entertainment

**Founded** 1997 **Origin** Canada **Notable games** *Company Of Heroes, Warhammer 40,000: Dawn Of War*

Ever since *Homeworld* revolutionised the realtime strategy genre in 1999, Relic has toiled within this doggedly unfashionable field, fine-tuning key elements and forging itself its own subgenre in the tense fights for turf that define *Dawn Of War* and *Company Of Heroes*. The latter's eagerly anticipated sequel shows every sign that Relic's eye for detail is as superb as ever.

## 49 Jagex Games Studio

**Founded** 2000 **Origin** UK **Notable games** *RuneScape, Transformers Universe*

It might be the years spent toiling in the crowded and confusing Java gaming space, but Jagex somehow still isn't a megastar of the development world, despite attracting over 200 million registrations for its trusty (and slightly rusty) MMORPG, *RuneScape*. Perhaps the arrival of *Transformers Universe* will finally bludgeon greater acknowledgement out of the industry.

## 48 WayForward Technologies

**Founded** 1990 **Origin** US **Notable games** *Mighty Switch Force, Contra 4, A Boy And His Blob*

Fiendishly combining contract work with its own beautifully made puzzle-platformers, WayForward has survived 20 years in a volatile industry by keeping its head down. But its games are far from bland. This studio has a remarkable knack for applying creativity to everything, including low-budget DSi download games and licences both beloved (*A Boy And His Blob*) and not so (*BloodRayne*).

## 47 Halfbrick Studios

**Founded** 2001 **Origin** Australia **Notable games** *Fruit Ninja, Monster Dash, Jetpack Joyride*

For its first eight years in business, this Queensland-based studio mostly pumped out unremarkable licensed GBA, DS and PSP titles. Then it hit pay dirt with *Fruit Ninja* in 2010, one of the first iPhone hits to truly understand the concept of touch gaming. It followed up with the ludicrously successful endless runner *Jetpack Joyride*, which cemented its mastery over the touchscreen with a blend of humour, tight arcade play and simplicity that few can resist.

## 46 The Creative Assembly

**Founded** 1987 **Origin** UK **Notable games** *Rome: Total War, Total War: Shogun 2*

Like Relic Entertainment, The Creative Assembly has prospered by steadily iterating on its own reading of the strategy template for over a decade. The *Total War* series matches a scholarly understanding of its games' respective eras with detailed visuals and an engrossingly epic scale, growing richer with every new entry. It's the David Lean of game development.

## 45 Capybara Games

**Founded** 2003 **Origin** Canada **Notable games** *Might And Magic: Clash Of Heroes, Critter Crunch*

Founded by a group of friends who met in a Toronto bar and created their first iPhone titles in their spare time, Capybara is the very definition of a hipster indie studio: platform agnostic, open to offbeat ideas and enthusiastic about the craft of design. And yet its colourful and distinctive games remain supremely inviting to any player.

## 44 SCE Santa Monica Studio

**Founded** 1999 **Origin** US **Notable games** *God Of War, Flow*

Sony's Santa Monica Studio is a mass of contradictions. On one hand, it is responsible for *God Of War*, a pugilistic, technically superlative hack-and-slash blockbuster series. On the other, its external development arm has fostered and collaborated with others on a range of thoughtful experimental titles, from *Journey* to *The Unfinished Swan*. As such, it's an example to all.

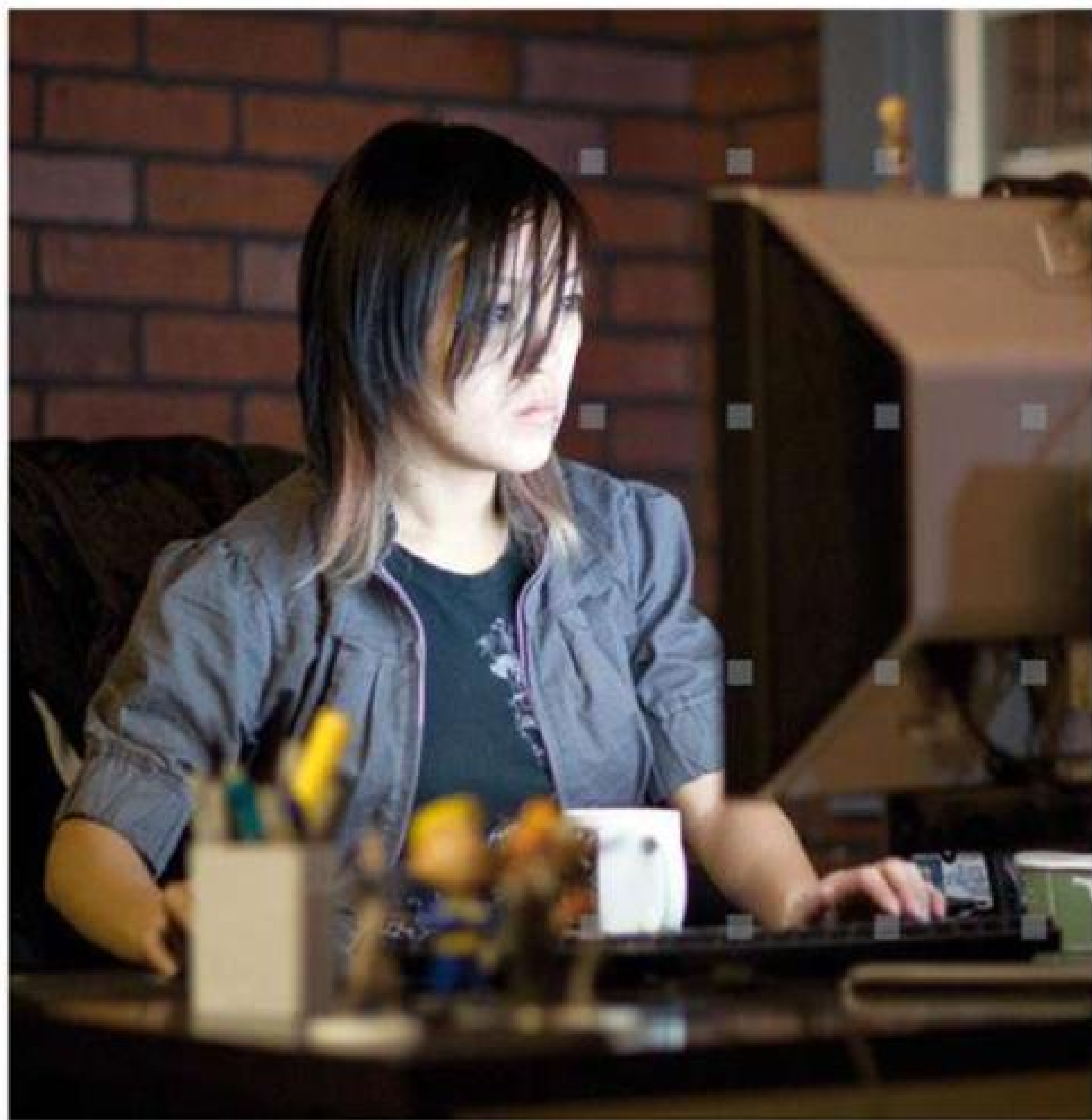
43

# Harmonix Music Systems

**Founded** 1995 **Origin** US **Notable games** *Guitar Hero, Rock Band, Dance Central*

Harmonix brought music gaming to the masses through *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band*. When that genre became saturated, it brilliantly transferred the concept from instrumentation to movement, creating *Dance Central*, the series that brings out the best in Kinect. This year will see it launch a brand new series; it will be fascinating to see where Harmonix takes interactive audio next.





*EVE Online*'s population far outstrips that of developer CCP's home of Iceland



Id Software's FPS, *Rage*



Ninja Theory co-founder and 'chief creative ninja' Tameem Antoniades

## 42 Mossmouth

**Founded** 2009 **Origin** US **Notable games** *Spelunky*

Comic book artist, website editor, developer: Derek Yu, AKA Mossmouth, is the US indie scene's Renaissance man. His games betray a deep love for classic mechanics, but he also adds his own spice, especially to *Spelunky*, which crosses Roguelikes with platformers to both infuriating and giddily compulsive effect.

## 41 Criterion Games

**Founded** 1993 **Origin** UK **Notable games** *Burnout 3: Takedown, Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit*

With *Burnout*, this Guildford studio took the principles of the great '80s arcade racers, added hyper-real crash physics and changed driving games forever. Now burnishing EA's tarnished *Need For Speed* series, it's showing how its aptitude for silky control and shiny looks still reaps tremendous rewards, but we'd still love to see it apply that talent to new pastures.

## 40 Codemasters

**Founded** 1986 **Origin** UK **Notable games** *Dirt, Grid*

Codemasters jettisoned its wider publishing ambitions to effectively become a racing specialist a while ago, and has diligently pressed on with a dramatic take on the form ever since, which has led to it reinvigorating the F1 simulation. While key series *Dirt* and *Grid* have never quite assailed the likes of *Forza* and *Gran Turismo*, they boast the kind of ideas that you soon find cropping up in other games.

## 38 Ninja Theory

**Founded** 2000 **Origin** UK **Notable games** *Heavenly Sword, Enslaved: Odyssey To The West, DmC: Devil May Cry*

Ninja Theory is often accused of valuing style over substance, or story over gameplay, but its early two games are memorable – if mostly for their dramatic staging. With *DmC*, though, Ninja Theory has showed that it can also achieve genuine mechanical depth.

## 37 Id Software

**Founded** 1991 **Origin** US **Notable games** *Wolfenstein 3D, Doom, Quake, Rage*

Id was *the* studio of the '90s, but somehow between *Doom 3*'s long development cycle and the arrival of eccentric shooter *Rage*, it seems to have lost its assured vision. But with such a heritage and John Carmack still a technical visionary whose word attracts such attention, you have to admit that you're intrigued about what will come next from this old master.

## 36 Telltale Games

**Founded** 2004 **Origin** US **Notable games** *Sam & Max Save The World, The Walking Dead*

Telltale's episodic adventure series wildly fluctuate in quality. This year's *Jurassic Park* was a giant stomping disaster, but then it released *The Walking Dead*. This tense, exciting and emotionally wrought interpretation of the comic book finally fully validated Telltale's televisual approach and hints at great things for the future.

## 35 CCP Games

**Founded** 1997 **Origin** Iceland **Notable games** *EVE Online, Dust 514*

Despite being a decade old now, *Eve Online* remains the purest vision of the MMOG: a persistent universe that's utterly subject to the machinations of its players. CCP's work to give *Eve*'s community governance is progressive and inspiring, while upcoming horror MMOG *World Of Darkness* and PS3 shooter *Dust 514* display the company's fabulous ambition.

## 34 Vlambeer

**Founded** 2010 **Origin** Netherlands **Notable games** *Radical Fishing, Super Crate Box, Luftrauser*

This two-man studio's tireless work ethic and keen understanding of arcade immediacy in games such as *Super Crate Box* and *Luftrauser* has made it a standard bearer for twitch-based indie gaming. Its keen sense for clear design and meaty audio-visual response has gained it a strong following, though sadly its work is popular enough to see *Radical Fishing* cloned on iOS.

39

Quantic Dream founder David Cage is a passionate advocate for games to strive to better express emotion and story

# Quantic Dream

**Founded** 1997 **Origin** France **Notable games** *Omikron: The Nomad Soul, Fahrenheit, Heavy Rain*

Depending on who you speak to, this studio has either made a clutch of atmospheric psychological thrillers that push the boundaries of gaming, or pretentious pot-boilers that are rife with agonisingly flawed design choices. Under founder David Cage, however, the studio has always made provocative and ambitious adventures that push gaming technology and control systems to express his fascinating vision.



David Anfossi, executive producer at Eidos Montreal



Crytek's founders, the Yerli brothers. From left: MD Faruk, MD Avni and CEO Cevat

BioWare's *Mass Effect* series



## 33 RedLynx

**Founded** 2000 **Origin** Finland **Notable games** *Trials HD, MotoHeroz, Trials Evolution*

If it plays games, RedLynx has probably made a compulsively playable game for it. Yes, even N-Gage. The studio has built a reputation for combining supremely nuanced physics-based play with ingenious (read: sadistic) level design. Despite being acquired by Ubisoft in late 2011, it maintains a fiercely independent spirit.

## 32 Crytek

**Founded** 1999 **Origin** Germany **Notable games** *Far Cry, Crysis*

While *Crysis 3* has a lot to prove in 2013, the engine that runs it remains the benchmark for videogame realism, and enables Crytek to build worlds you can't help but want to visit. The studio isn't one to sit still, though, going into free-to-play with *Warface* and even social networks with Gface. Crytek always aims high, but is that down to hubris or genius? This year should tell.

## 31 Sony Online Entertainment

**Founded** 1995 **Origin** US **Notable games** *EverQuest, PlanetSide, Star Wars Galaxies*

SOE may have seemed to lose its composure over the past few years, but amid all manner of crowd-pleasing edicts from head John Smedley about his egalitarian and player-centric vision for games, it then bounced back with *PlanetSide 2*. It has proved SOE can still produce massively multiplayer worlds that live up to their promise – enough for *EverQuest Next* to look formidable.

## 30 Playdead

**Founded** 2006 **Origin** Denmark **Notable games** *Limbo*

Arnt Jensen and Dino Patti spent several years toiling for mainstream developers before forming Playdead to bring the allegorical adventure *Limbo* to monochrome life. Key to that game's success was its uncompromising attention to detail and deeply personal feel – values that Playdead will surely bring to its next release.

## 29 Eidos Montreal

**Founded** 2007 **Origin** Canada **Notable games** *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*

It usually takes a mature studio to make a game as assured as *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, and yet it was Eidos Montreal's first release. This richly conceived continuation of Ion Storm's cyberpunk opus gives us great hope for the studio's next project, *Thief 4*, another sequel with impeccable, if creatively challenging, credentials.

## 28 BioWare

**Founded** 1995 **Origin** Canada **Notable games** *Baldur's Gate, Star Wars: The Old Republic, Mass Effect, Dragon Age*

With the controversy surrounding *Mass Effect 3*'s ending, the loss of 400,000 *Old Republic* subscribers and the departure of its founders, 2012 was a dramatic year for the RPG specialist. BioWare is bruised and bloodied, but with a new *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect* in development, it's still a leader.

## 27 EA Canada

**Founded** 1983 **Origin** Canada **Notable games** *FIFA, Skate, The Sims 3*

EA's largest studio continues to be its most reliable cash cow, with both the *FIFA* and *Sims* brands being farmed to within an inch of their lives. But they're realised with such a commitment to consistent quality that you can hardly begrudge the approach.

## 26 Firaxis Games

**Founded** 1996 **Origin** US **Notable games** *Sid Meier's Civilization V, XCOM: Enemy Unknown*

Having spent years crafting *Civilization V* to critical acclaim, Firaxis went on to release *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, a remake of a classic that made sensitive and intelligent tweaks to superb effect. Firaxis is the kind of studio that's seemingly never in a rush, and the games it makes exemplify that care.



Terry Cavanagh, creator of *VVVVVV* and *Super Hexagon*



*Assassin's Creed* has become one of Ubisoft Montreal's most valuable series

Thatgamecompany's Jenova Chen

## 25 343 Industries

**Founded** 2007 **Origin** US **Notable games** *Halo 4*

Operating out of Bungie's old office in Kirkland, Washington, 343 Industries did just what it needed to with *Halo 4*, creating an assured and reverential continuation of the series. The fact it achieved this from a standing start, forming the studio as it built the game, speaks well for a future in which 343 will surely be key to launching the next Xbox.

## 24 Gearbox Software

**Founded** 1999 **Origin** US **Notable games** *Borderlands, Brothers In Arms*

The Texas-based shooter specialist has carved out a characterful niche in a suffocating market, and yet always resists pigeonholing, offering witty schlock in *Borderlands* and historical tactics in *Brothers In Arms*. The jury's out on *Aliens: Colonial Marines* and who knows what *BIA: Furious 4* will bring, but such questions only highlight the studio's knack for surprises.

## 23 Thatgamecompany

**Founded** 2006 **Origin** US **Notable games** *Flow, Flower, Journey*

By pushing emotion and aesthetics to the fore, Jenova Chen's team has taken art games into the mainstream. The extraordinary *Journey* struck a powerful chord with its beautiful audio, visual and multiplayer design. Having finished a three-game contract with Sony, and with many of its core staff gone, the studio's future is uncertain, but it's still a beacon for the power of new ideas.





## 22 Terry Cavanagh

**Founded** 2008 **Origin** UK **Notable games** *VVVVVV, Super Hexagon, Don't Look Back*

With the recent success of reflex masterpiece *Super Hexagon*, Cavanagh has shown that platformer *VVVVVV* was anything but a fluke. A frequent contributor to game jams and a passionate evangelist for other indies' work, he's an important proponent of the idea that games can be a form of self-expression. But if there's a secret to his work that all should learn from, it's that his games are never self-indulgent.

## 21 Double Fine Productions

**Founded** 2000 **Origin** US **Notable games** *Psychonauts, Brütal Legend, Happy Action Theater*

Tim Schafer's lovable studio remains a refuge for inventive and original design, even if the likes of *Stacking*, *Iron Brigade* and *Sesame Street: Once Upon A Monster* also proved frustratingly underdeveloped. But with its public explorations of how a small studio with bright ideas can carve its own path in a turbulent industry, Double Fine has become an exemplar for a new model of development, a point pressed home by *Double Fine Adventure*'s record-breaking Kickstarter campaign and inclusive ventures such as the recent Amnesia Fortnight Humble Bundle.

## 20 Bethesda Game Studios

**Founded** 1986 **Origin** US **Notable games** *Fallout 3, The Elder Scrolls*

In the gargantuan *Elder Scrolls* and *Fallout* series, Bethesda captures the vast scope of great science fiction and fantasy sagas in a form that has captivated a generation of players, offering hundreds of hours of exploration, combat and stealing stuff from NPC's houses. We can't ignore the mysterious and significant problems behind *Skyrim*'s PS3 port, but Bethesda's ability to fashion the immensity of that game's world with fewer than 100 staff in three years is little short of astonishing.

## 19 Ubisoft Montreal

**Founded** 1997 **Origin** Canada **Notable games** *Prince Of Persia, Splinter Cell, Assassin's Creed, Far Cry*

Ubisoft's premier studio is a bastion of originality and risk-taking in the mainstream industry, continually sending its most valuable properties, such as *Far Cry* and *Assassin's Creed*, down weird creative alleyways that still garner it broad retail success. The E3 reveal of thriller *Watch Dogs* also showed its willingness to create new IP at a time when few of its peers dare to, while reminding us of its ability to provoke a response from the kind of thematically challenging premise that birthed *Assassin's Creed*.

# 15 Irrational Games

**Founded** 1997 **Origin** US **Notable games** *System Shock 2, BioShock*

Cerebral, disturbing and controversial, *BioShock* is the thinking player's FPS. Irrational co-founder Ken Levine's enthusiasm for discussing the team's creative process makes him a valuable advocate for development. And the way his studio's games explore themes that have never been ploughed by games before, from Randism to the Boxer Rebellion, uplifts those who wish their passion would more often look beyond the holy trinity of Aliens, Bladerunner and the works of Tolkien.

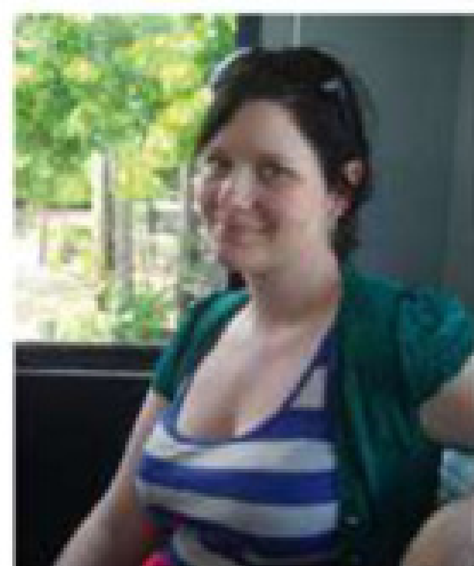
Irrational continues its fascination for US socio-political history in *BioShock Infinite*

Hideo Kojima keeps saying he'll retire from *Metal Gear* but he can't seem to let go





*Mirror's Edge*, developed by DICE



Siobhan Reddy, studio director of developer Media Molecule

## 18 Rocksteady Studios

**Founded** 2004 **Origin** UK **Notable games** *Batman: Arkham City*

Rocksteady's precision in isolating the qualities that make a great superhero game was one thing. That it translated them into a title as inventive as *Arkham Asylum* was another. *Arkham City* further proved the merits of its playful yet sensitive approach to Batman canon and evinced a rare talent for thirdperson action, suggesting it could triumph with any property.

## 17 Blizzard Entertainment

**Founded** 1994 **Origin** US **Notable games** *Diablo, World Of Warcraft, StarCraft*

*Diablo III*'s controversial auction house tested the faith of fans and *World Of Warcraft* is well past its prime, but Blizzard's eye for scale, detail and deep design maintains its position as a leader in PC gaming. But that puts a lot of pressure on the studio's next MMOG, *Titan*, which few would expect to be anything less than revolutionary.

## 16 ArenaNet

**Founded** 2000 **Origin** US **Notable games** *Guild Wars*

In a genre that's so often in thrall to *World Of Warcraft*, ArenaNet has forged its own route, addressing the genre's problems with smartly progressive design. *Guild Wars* dumped the subscription model, while its sequel added rewards and social play to the act of exploring its beautifully presented world. These games' generosity marks ArenaNet's deserved confidence in its craft.

## 14 Kojima Productions

**Founded** 2005 **Origin** Japan **Notable games** *Metal Gear Solid*

The *Metal Gear* series is iconic for good reason, its uncompromising and singular approach to technology, design and story making it consistently stand proud. This is a series and a developer that revels in its own mythos, and as such has sealed Hideo Kojima's reputation as a true development celebrity. Under his experienced hand, Kojima Productions is, and always has been, leading the way.

## 13 EA DICE

**Founded** 1992 **Origin** Sweden **Notable games** *Mirror's Edge, Battlefield*

Like Epic and id, DICE is always in danger of becoming a slave to its superlative technology; the Frostbite 2 engine is in constant demand within EA. Either that, or it could turn into a *Battlefield* machine, cranking out sequels and expansions forevermore. But this is also the studio behind the problematic but unforgettable *Mirror's Edge*. That spirit is just the thing to stop DICE from becoming a victim of its own success.

## 12 Media Molecule

**Founded** 2006 **Origin** UK **Notable games** *LittleBigPlanet*

While Sony's other games brought conventional pizazz to PS3, *LittleBigPlanet* brought heart. Operating with a democratic, intuitive approach to development, Media Molecule kick-started a global trend for handicraft visuals and enabling gamer creativity. But under the soft exterior lies a hard love of technology and the ability to bend it to its own will, lending the impression that this studio can make anything it dreams of.

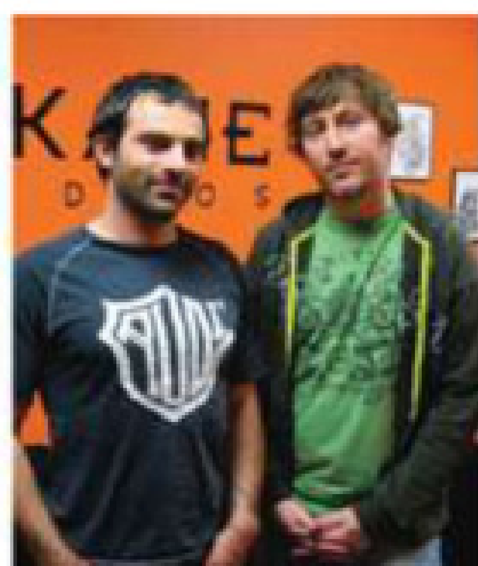
## 11 Epic Games

**Founded** 1991 **Origin** US **Notable games** *Unreal Tournament, Gears Of War*

Epic Games is a rare studio that has struck a symbiotic balance between licensing its technology and consistently making best-in-class games. The *Unreal Tournament* and *Gears Of War* series certainly advertise Unreal Engine's technical potential, but they also show off their creative teams' talent for squeezing power from aging consoles and fun from guns. Despite a recent rash of high-profile talent exiting the studio, Epic's momentum – with projects ongoing for console, mobile and PC – seems unstoppable.




From left: Kenji Saito, Atsushi Inaba, Hideki Kamiya, Tatsuya Minami and Masaki Yamanaka of Platinum Games



Arkane Studios' Raph Colantonio and Harvey Smith

FromSoftware's *Dark Souls II*



## 10 Riot Games

**Founded** 2006 **Origin** US **Notable games** *League Of Legends*

Leading the charge into the MOBA genre, Santa Monica-based Riot Games now claims that over 30 million players pile into *League Of Legends*, its free-to-play strategy brawler, every month. Now an eSports mainstay, Riot's balanced design, constant updates and community involvement has helped *LOL* become a way of life for some. The question is: what's next?

## 9 Arkane Studios

**Founded** 1999 **Origin** France **Notable games** *Arx Fatalis, Dishonored*

With a complex history of cancelled projects and quiet contributions to titles such as *Call Of Duty: World At War* and *BioShock 2*, Arkane was already fascinating before it launched our game of 2012, *Dishonored*. Its particular attention to player choice and peculiar capacity to weave art, sound and game design into an elegant whole place it in our top tier of studios.

## 8 FromSoftware

**Founded** 1986 **Origin** Japan **Notable games** *Armored Core, Dark Souls*

Japanese development might face detractors, but FromSoftware has been proving them wrong, cultivating bold new realisations of the RPG in *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls*. These games' appreciation of the value of challenge has attracted legions of fans, and also reconfigured our expectations of console games.

## 7 Bungie

**Founded** 1991 **Origin** US **Notable games** Marathon, Halo

Profiled in this issue (p124), this FPS and console multiplayer innovator cut its ties with both *Halo* and Microsoft back in 2007, but it has taken with it a passion for raising the bar and a deep respect for players. It's enough to ensure its new epic, *Destiny*, should meet even its own stratospheric expectations.

## 6 Rockstar North

**Founded** 2002 **Origin** UK **Notable games** *Grand Theft Auto*

This obsessively secretive studio altered the course of the whole game industry with *Grand Theft Auto III*, and has continued to define not only the open-world adventure but also the upper limits of videogame production values ever since. Its ambitions for games' ability to entertain through both story and action is an inspiration for all developers.

## 5 Naughty Dog

**Founded** 1989 **Origin** US **Notable games** *Crash Bandicoot, Jak & Daxter, Uncharted*

Naughty Dog is the Spielberg of developers: unabashedly mainstream and capable of enthralling broad audiences with humour, drama and sheer spectacle. No other studio has its grasp of dialogue and character, and few meet its proficiency in applying technical innovation to its creative ideas. All of which means Naughty Dog is Sony's most important developer.

## 4 Platinum Games

**Founded** 2006 **Origin** Japan **Notable games** *MadWorld, Bayonetta, Vanquish*

Independence is a profound value of this storied Japanese developer, and a big part of why its games are so bold and why it takes such evident care over them. The results of Platinum's confidence in its talent are such wild fancies as *Vanquish* and *Bayonetta*, while the upcoming *Wonderful 101* and *Metal Gear Rising* promise equally offbeat and engaging delights.

## 3 Nintendo EAD

**Founded** 1983 **Origin** Japan **Notable games** *Super Mario Bros, The Legend Of Zelda, Wii Sports, Metroid*

Videogames, Nintendo, Mario, Miyamoto: for 30 years those words have been inextricably linked. No studio in the world understands the science of play better than Nintendo EAD, and most developers remain its students. Perhaps its greatest achievement is in how it hides the fantastic complexities of its craft so completely under its games' perfect surfaces.

2

# Mojang

**Founded** 2009 **Origin** Sweden **Notable games** *Minecraft, Scrolls*

Mojang is a new kind of developer, one forged in egalitarian indie culture and hardened by the incredible success of *Minecraft*. Without losing any of its renowned individuality, it has grown to support releases of its hit on new platforms, and now holds conventions and publishes games, all while it continues to develop more of its own. It also holds the industry spellbound as its founder, Markus Persson, champions both player and developer rights. Mojang is an inspiration for having achieved something very special: giving us the freedom to create.

*Minecraft* designer and Mojang co-founder Markus 'Notch' Persson



# 1 Valve




**Founded** 1996 **Origin** US
**Notable games** *Half-Life* series, *Portal* series, *Team Fortress 2*, *Counter-Strike* series, *Left 4 Dead* series, *Dota 2*


lve




The company's collaborative ideals make working closely together vital, so its core staff is based in its offices in Bellevue, near Seattle. But it has satellites: a Luxembourg office to serve the EU, a new two-man team in San Francisco, and it used to own *Left 4 Dead* maker Turtle Rock Studios in California




**Half-Life**
The series that made Valve's fortune is still the studio's banner game. *Half-Life 2*, which launched in 2004, kicked off both Steam and the Source engine, which remain mainstays for Valve's business, and the industry waits with baited breath for the next instalment

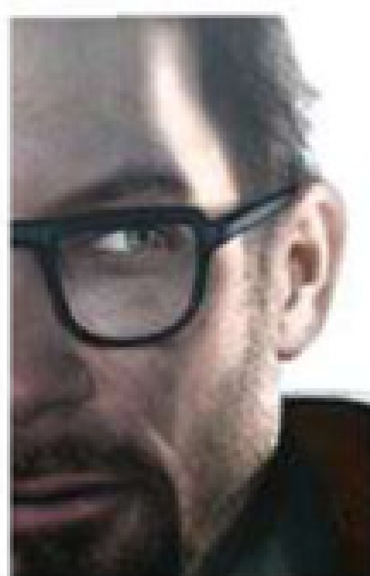


Maybe it's a little late to be worrying about this now that we've chosen Valve as the best game developer in the world, but a minute into our time with founder and president **Gabe Newell** we have to ask. Does he even see the company as a game developer any more?

After all, Valve's sprawling interests regularly break out from pure game making. It owns and runs Steam, the platform that dominates almost all aspects of PC gaming, and now even offers non-game apps. It also develops Source, a world-class engine. It's spearheading advances onto unfamiliar platforms, notably Linux, and creating whole new ones with avant-garde skunkworks projects. In helping develop new hardware, it's intending to take the PC to the living room and thus will go up against Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo. It's proposing new ways of filmmaking using game technology. It's exploring new business models and relationships between players and their games in the form of a community-centric virtual market for *Team Fortress 2*. It's taking on eSports with *Dota 2*.

Newell replies to our question offhandedly, "We think of ourselves as a game developer, sure."

And yes, Valve is also prolific in making games, despite its unique attitude to release dates. Over 2012, it released major updates to *Team Fortress 2* and *Portal 2*, put out DLC for *Left 4 Dead 2*, moved *Dota 2* into paid beta (it's still now by far the most popular game on Steam), and launched *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*. That's a greater shipping rate than most studios of its size; Valve comprises just 350 people, stretched over six floors of an ugly 1980s marble-and-black-glass high-rise in Bellevue, just outside of Seattle. By comparison, Ubisoft Montreal can count over 2,000 employees to its name. Valve also opened a new floor to house audio studios last month, which marketing director Doug Lombardi had managed to forget until reminded of it.



Yet Valve's few make their company the most encompassing game developer in the world. They provide it with the most expansive perception of not only the nature of games, but what forms they'll take in the future. Valve might seem to be straying into territory outside games, but that's a narrow view of what it's trying to do. The point, according to Newell, is that when you think about games and what it takes to entertain millions, it's no longer just about the specifics of individual titles.

"When you're off working on user interfaces for letting your friends sort groups of their friends by the games they have, certainly game developers think you're doing game development at that point," he says. "Or if you're making a *TF2* short [video]. It's just the definition of what gamers want continues to change all the time. And we just feel like we're following behind and trying to understand that better." In that statement you'll find the core of Valve's approach: it aims to understand what players truly want.

This leads on to the key role of data, a word pretty much everyone we speak to at Valve uses frequently, because it informs everything they

## Alden Kroll

Designer

I think I've been here eight years now. I joined because I wanted to work at a smaller company that let me have involvement in a project from the beginning to the end. I was previously at a much larger company where I only got to work on a very small portion of a project, and it felt like I really had no control over where it was heading. And so coming to Valve really let me be able to help shape the projects I'm working on and drive them forward and actually ship stuff a lot faster.




## Mike Sartain
Engineer

I actually worked with Microsoft for ten years, and then I went over to a small company called RAD Game Tools. RAD is actually probably one of the best places you can work as a developer; there's between five and ten employees and you get royalties based on the products that you sell and they take care of the business side. You could sit, you could write code all day long, you didn't have meetings - you just kind of came in and did what you wanted. After being there for ten years, small one- or two-person projects are limiting in a way, so I tried to find a company where you could work with more people on a similar basis. Valve used to be across the street from RAD, actually, so I wound up coming over here and it's as close to RAD as you can get with a larger company.

do. Take *TF2*'s new Mann Vs Machine, a cooperative mode that uses AI taken from *Left 4 Dead*. "It started out as something we had a fair bit of data on that told us that it should be fun, in this case elements of *Left 4 Dead* and *TF2* combined, and then over time, through playtesting, it evolved into something that was more specific to *TF2*," designer **Robin Walker** says. The data itself was partly gleaned from speculative fan talk on forums, and that then led to Valve's classic iteration- and playtesting-based development process.

*TF2*'s path to becoming free-to-play in June 2011 also illustrates the point, being spurred by Valve's realisation that it didn't know an awful lot about the business model. "One of the things we often do as a company is think about where we might need to be in five or ten years to stay alive," Walker says. "It would be terrible to work for a couple of years on a new game and then ship it, and then have it fail because of the business model, which is new to us, even though the game is good. So we started looking around for how we can get some data on this."

That said, going free wasn't even the most interesting part of the equation to Valve – knowing that the secret to *Counter-Strike*'s success was its modding community, the primary goal was to build the game a marketplace for user-generated content. The project yielded huge rewards: revenues increased twelvefold, and today *TF2*'s community, which votes for what becomes available to buy, makes far more content for the game than Valve. "The fact that it turned out to be very successful was really nice, but ultimately the data is more valuable to our longterm success," Walker says.

The endeavour also supported another of Valve's core ideals: that if it can make its customers – that's another word that gets used a lot – happy, it will pay off in the end. Back in the late '90s when Valve was trying to make *Half-Life* a great platform for modders, a question kept being raised about how it would make money from the idea. "At the time, all we fell back on was that if a bunch of people really like this then maybe they'll buy our next game," Walker remembers.

This turned out to be a powerful truth, now giving credence to even the idea of entering into whole new game communities and competing with some of the most fiercely popular games around, including the likes of *League Of Legends*. But, as project lead **Erik Johnson** says, competition isn't "the kind of thing we really pay attention to". Remarkably, *Dota 2* is Valve's first non-FPS game, but it comes with a sizeable existing fanbase. "From [the] business side of things, if we can make all those people happy then we can have a fine business out of *Dota 2*," he explains.

The game also comes with its predecessor's developer, Abdul 'IceFrog' Ismail, who Valve took on in admiration for how he transformed the first *DotA*, a mod for *WarCraft III*, in a few successive updates. "It was like: this person's better than us," says Johnson. "Communicating with

and building a community over time – all of our tricks that we've been doing for years – this one person by himself is doing a better job than we do."

Valve wanted his talent rather than to specifically make *Dota 2*, and the eventual decision to work on the game is an example of Valve's pragmatism. In Johnson's words, Valve's goal in decision making is, "What is the most efficient thing for us to work on to entertain the most people?" This is also an insight into why another sequel to *Half-Life* hasn't yet appeared – making a highly expensive, linear, story-driven singleplayer game just isn't efficient when stacked against the community payoffs of a top-class multiplayer game.

It's clear, though, that Valve knows it has to break *Dota 2* into a busy marketplace. In August 2011, it ran The International, a tournament for which it put down a total of $1.6 million in prize money – then the largest purse in eSports. It followed it up in 2012 with a sequel that offered the same sum. Such tournaments are a chance to promote the game, of course, but there's a lot more to them than that. "For now, it's a little bit of a Band-Aid [while we] figure out how professional gamers can make a bunch of money – basically be compensated for the value they're actually producing," Johnson explains.



**Portal**
Most Valve games feel a bit like experiments, but *Portal* took that idea to heart. This short-form addition to 2007's *The Orange Box* reinvented the puzzle game and ended up overshadowing its stablemates, which led to 2011's critically acclaimed sequel

Valve sees professional players as 'content producers', and to suit that *Dota 2* has a built-in spectator mode. In Johnson's words, such players "can do something very few people in the world can do, and a bunch of people get entertainment value out of watching them do it. The reason why we need to do that is that they're some of the highest value content producers inside of the *Dota 2* world and if, for whatever reason, it stops making sense for those people to produce that content then the community is worse off."

Underpinning both *Dota 2* and *TF2*'s boldest achievements is, of course, Steam, which has stretched to facilitate their needs. Steam Workshop, for instance, originally launched to support *TF2*'s Mann Co. Store, and relaunched early last year to support any game with a marketplace for mods and content. With many of its staff ex-modders themselves, mod culture is woven into Valve's very fabric, and the company profits from Workshop in every sense, learning what's popular from what players make, while seeing its games constantly being refreshed. It has also made for fruitful relationships with thirdparty games such as *Skyrim*, for which Bethesda released the Creation Kit, turning Steam into the best place to be playing the game.

It profits the modders as well. "The makers of the content in *Skyrim* got this awesome feedback loop," says director of



**Anna Sweet**
Business developer

I work more on the business side, and I like being able to know that my decisions make an actual impact on what the company is going to do, and to be able to actually measure and see how good those decisions were. And I also really value being able to work around such really, really smart people. I feel like every day I learn just from the people that I sit next to.

## Jason Holtman

Director of business development

I joined Valve because it was different from what I was doing before. I am an attorney by trade, so I worked for Valve for a long time as an outside attorney, and seven or eight years ago they asked me to come work for them. Business and legal is a really exciting area to work in for a company like this that's interested in entertainment experiences across a broad range. I couldn't be happier because it's a very exciting place to come and to work.



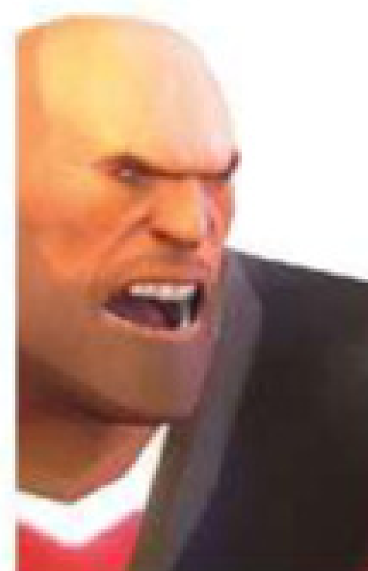
## Greg Coomer

Designer

I was one of the first five or six people to join the company. I worked with Gabe and Mike [Harrington] at Microsoft, and the two of them just basically convinced me that it was going to be a pretty incredible place to be… It was a different kind of way to put together an organisation. I shipped *Half-Life* and then I went off and started my own thing… I eventually came back, and after that I spent my time working on trying to capture what it was that was so special about Valve, in the past couple of years doing that in the form of a handbook for new employees.

business development **Jason Holtman**. "All of a sudden, they weren't just labouring for the very few people who would take the time to install extra horse packs or sound environments." Valve is quietly exporting its own way of making games to the benefit of all.

"One thing that we think is happening is at some point you guys are going to have Developer Of The Year and it's going to be the gamers themselves," says Newell. "We're going to end up with a situation where companies are best at creating a framework in which gamers are creating the vast majority of the value; that notion of user-generated content is going to be critical for the next round of successful entertainment properties."



> Team Fortress 2
Valve's longest-running test bed. The popular multiplayer FPS has now become a petri dish for a player-made content market, a free-to-play business model and goodness knows what else in the future, yet has retained its identity throughout it all

While few could have foreseen it, in retrospect Greenlight was the logical next step, then. Built on Workshop's voting infrastructure, from August 2012 it has become the only way for developers and publishers new to working with Steam to have a chance of releasing their games on the platform. It was also a response to Valve's admitted problems with running Steam's marketplace. It was getting eight to ten submissions a day, so evaluation had become a part of many staff members' jobs, and the queue was months long. The setup also suffered from a lack of transparency. So, in classic form, why shouldn't Steam's community have a voice, and use its millions of eyes to highlight great games rather than rely on the scant few at Valve?

Greenlight, of course, also sparked a great deal of criticism, especially after the establishment of its $100 fee (which goes to the Child's Play charity) to prevent joke submissions became seen as a bar to cash-poor and ideas-rich indie developers.

As ever, Valve's response was that Greenlight, like all its post-*TF2* projects, is a work in progress that will change with user feedback, but it was also surprised at how polarised the takes on its attempt to make Steam more transparent had been. It has rationalised some of the vehemence as the result of fans seeing their favoured projects failing in a public forum, but while we visit a third batch of titles is being passed for publishing without obvious controversy – making 50 games in total – so perhaps much of the reaction was just a new idea's teething troubles.

"[We think] at some point you guys are going to have Developer Of The Year and it's going to be the gamers themselves"

Not that Greenlight is perfect, of course, but developers have enjoyed some of its rewarding side effects. Like Kickstarter, Greenlight can help promote games before launch. "If you don't have an actual publisher doing all the marketing for you, you need to get good at that, so Greenlight becomes sort of a test bed for iterating on your marketing message – how to improve your trailers, how to show off your screenshots and how to describe your game," says designer **Alden Kroll**. It also acts as a feedback tool, as engineer **Tom Bui** reveals: "[Developers] are getting a lot more, and better kinds of, feedback from potential customers than they were ever getting anywhere else."

Greenlight is another example of Valve exporting some of its philosophy to the wider world of development, but in opening up Steam to non-game software, it's going even further afield. Ambitions are high: it would like Steam's features to inspire the creation of apps with the equivalent impact of a *Counter-Strike* or *Garry's Mod*. "It may sound silly, but it makes a ton of sense to have something akin to achievements in software, something like leaderboards, and why wouldn't you want your friends to be able to see what you're doing or share with them?" asks Holtman. It's a new concept for apps, and in many ways Steam could be better for users than the Mac App Store or Windows Store, given its automatic updates, content sharing, community hubs and Steam Guides.

In line with Newell's verdict on Windows 8 ("I think Windows 8 is a catastrophe for everyone in the PC space"), the move also sidelines Microsoft's new OS and pushes Steam forward as the de facto app hub on PC. Holtman tells us that apps are "exactly what customers want" on Steam, but it's hard not to see other impulses informing Valve's steps into this new space, namely a desire to take a more central role in the PC ecosystem.

The same sense is there in Steam's Linux client, which is currently in beta. The initiative originated with Newell pushing the idea five years ago, seeing a future in which it would be important to be everywhere. It seems like a prescient approach now, with business developer **Anna Sweet** encapsulating the trend by explaining that "as a whole the industry is looking at different platforms and




## Robin Walker

Designer

I joined Valve before it had shipped anything. No one knew how it was going to turn out. When myself, John Cook and Ian Caughley finished *Team Fortress* [in 1996], we were trying to start out on our own and we didn't know what we were doing. We got a lot of interest from publishers asking us what we were going to do next and if we were interested in doing work for hire, and every one of these contacts would turn into these long conversations. In the midst of all this, we got an email from Valve asking us if we'd be interested in coming over to work on *TF* for *Half-Life*. We said sure, and the next day we had plane tickets. So to some extent we joined Valve just because they were faster moving than everyone and we rejected everyone else's offers because we were young and silly enough.

different ways to reach gamers." But Valve still doesn't know the extent of the market for games on Linux. It does know how much passion there is in Linux's community, though, receiving plenty of assistance in testing and helping Steam support the many Linux distributions, but also facing censure. GNU Project founder Richard Stallman called Steam's DRMed and closed-source policies unethical, though he did acknowledge the rewards of attracting games and users to Linux. "I think there's been nothing of Valve's scale going into this," says engineer **Mike Sartain**.

And this sense is also present in Big Picture, Valve's push into the living room. "For a really long time, our customers had basically been asking us to build Big Picture," says project lead **Greg Coomer**. "They knew what games they loved, [and] they understood that the barrier to the living room, or the room they keep their television in, was really an artificial one."

"We just want to prove that divide no longer really serves software developers or users," reinforces Newell. But when Holtman evangelises the idea that PC games subtly change when they're made communal on a TV, you can't help but feel that Valve's also consciously making a bid for territory long held by consoles.

Both Holtman and Coomer would still distance themselves from the idea of Valve as competitor to the console makers; as ever, it's about what players want. Yet with a new console generation still unannounced, the power of today's PC hardware, and Steam's manifold features, the idea of a PC in the living room is extremely appealing. It helps that Valve has innovated in many areas already; Big Picture's text input interface is a revelation for anyone used to 360 or PS3's onscreen keyboards, and a clear example of Valve bettering existing living room computers.

**The next part** of the puzzle is hardware, of course. "So I'm with a group of people trying to think about how to bring all of those pieces together, solutions for customers," says Newell.

"We're thinking a lot about input, actually, and we have some people here who are thinking about [taking] the hardware side of input in a number of different directions," explains Coomer.

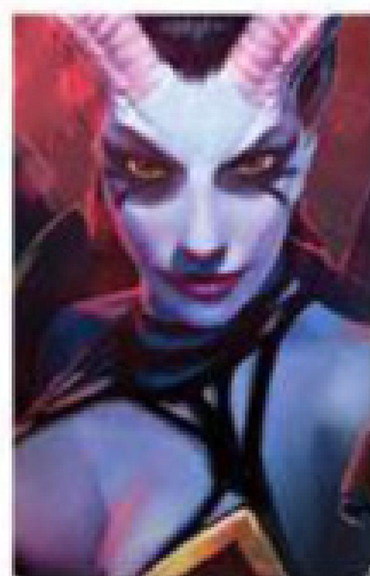
It seems Valve's outsider status gives it a little more latitude to experiment. Using the example of playing *Dota 2* in the living room, Coomer says that the team is seeing if it's possible to deliver an even better play experience via a traditional gamepad than players can get at a desk. Overall, Valve is taking three different approaches to the concept of PC game controllers for the living room and, true to form, is currently testing each to see what players like best.

Newell, meanwhile, is thinking about the computer itself. "How do you get a high-performance gaming PC that's quiet enough, and doesn't set fire to anything, and also fits in the living room environment?" That's the goal, but he says that the problem is fairly straightforward; the real question is about the partners Valve will work with.

**Dota 2**
Valve's first non-FPS game is a faithful adaptation of its mod-based forebear, with the company's ingenuity going into producing a distinctive art style, a spectator mode, and a social and competitive infrastructure instead. Still in beta, it's the most-played game on Steam

Longer term, Valve is thinking about entirely new platforms, including the speculative wearable computing technology that Michael Abrash is imagining. Currently, the team is exploring two broad approaches – augmented reality and virtual reality – but both are far too nascent to have taken any definite forms yet. "Optics are hard problems, five years out as opposed to five-month problems," Newell warns.

You have to wonder how 350 people can cover so much ground, but judging by Valve's output over the past year, the company seems to be addressing this vast spectrum. The answers lie in the pages of the Handbook For New Employees, a 56-page guide to Valve's working practices that, it's fair to say, set more than just the gaming world alight. "It's been almost overwhelming, the outpouring and questions about it," says Coomer, its author. "Agencies from all over the world were getting in touch: public works, legal institutions, real estate, a lot of companies interested in reforming their organisation from the practices outlined."



Widely assumed to be a leak (it was never intended to be secret), the handbook's wry tone and beautiful presentation described Valve's idiosyncratic hierarchy-less structure in order to ground new employees in a culture that Coomer says tended to take a year to fully understand. For anyone outside Valve, it was also a shining advert for a kind of development utopia, a freewheeling creative crucible.

And the culture it described is not merely excitable puff – Valve's employees really do choose what to work on, with only the regulation of a relentless focus on what customers want. Gabe Newell is not their boss. ("Of all the people at this company who aren't your boss, Gabe is the MOST not your boss, if you get what we're saying," says the handbook in his glossary entry.) Desks are on wheels, so people flit between projects as ideas and needs require. Ask Erik Johnson how many people work on *Dota 2* and he doesn't really know. "As opposed to companies that keep really strict headcount or have a running budget for a product, we don't think that spending a bunch of time thinking about those types of things actually makes our product better," he says.

Valve also doesn't recruit on the basis of roles that need filling – Big Picture was all about user interface design, but



**Erik Johnson**
Dota 2 lead

When I started at Valve, we hadn't shipped a game yet. I had worked for Sierra previously, which was publishing *Half-Life*, but within literally the first couple of hours that I spent at the office at Valve I was… just meeting the different people in the company; it was where I wanted to work. Things have changed, like when we go on company vacation every year there's a lot more babies, but other than that I think the culture of the company and the way we make decisions is similar to what it was when it was a tenth of the size.

**Tom Bui**
Engineer

I am a programmer by trade and I worked at EA before. The more and more I advanced up the ranks there, the more they wanted to make me a manager. That's not something I really want to do. I wanted to have a big impact on the project and the company, and the only way to do that was to get further and further away from what I love, which is programming. And at Valve I can actually program, help design things and help set product direction without compromising on what I love to do on a day-to-day basis. It all goes into the sort of free agent style of Valve's culture.

Valve used existing expertise only. "We instead just hire as many smart people as we possibly can and see where they fit," says Coomer.

Naturally, this doesn't make Valve a great place for developers who work best in structured environments. "So we have to either not hire those people or recognise that we're not creating an optimal environment for them," says Newell. "We're really good for people who like to set their own agendas, manage themselves, who've shipped their own products, are experienced, [and] we have people who are just as comfortable going on TV doing an interview as thinking about server costs and designing weapons. We're a great environment for someone who has that kind of breadth and flexibility, but we're a terrible environment for somebody who's coming straight out of school."

You have to wonder, too, whether all this would work for anyone else, despite Valve's tendency to export its culture. Valve certainly doesn't know. "Often I think our responses were somewhat disappointing to the people who got in touch with us," says Coomer, "because we have no idea whether the ideas in the handbook will be valuable or should be repeated by organisations other than our own, because it's so purpose-built for our needs."

Moreover, its experiences are moulded by its unique situation. *TF2*'s successes can't necessarily be followed by other games; developers hoping to make in-game hat markets aren't guaranteed similar success. And regardless of expertise, few companies have the funds and fan base Valve commands, or a game platform that they can mould to suit their needs. In this sense, Valve is a special case, an exemplar only for itself, a template that it would be dangerous for others to follow too closely.



**n the other** hand, Valve's practices are only becoming more ideal in the light of the rapid changes the industry is undergoing. Companies that can react flexibly to customer demand will better stay abreast of what appeals at any moment, and the move to supporting games over long lifetimes suits a company that isn't great at committing to hard deadlines. When we ask Johnson when *Dota 2* will go on full free-to-play release, he shrugs and says, "It's just kind of one point on a really long timeline that's kind of years and years long, so it's just kind of a different product launch to wrap your head around – something that we're probably going to learn a bunch from."

So not even Valve follows its own blueprint religiously, and perhaps that's the key to understanding Valve's character – its vision for the future, the quality of its games, the range of ideas and designs they embody, and why the company is active in pretty much every part of what constitutes videogames today. All arise from its incredible responsiveness to its players. "It's not really like there's one good choice," says Newell. "It's recognising what your strengths and weaknesses are, and designing your company in the same way you'd design a game." ■

## Gabe Newell

President

I'm at Valve hopefully for the same reason all the people are, which is I have a huge amount of fun. Once you're successful at building products that are interesting, and customers like them, and there are millions of those customers, it's pretty fun. And I still get to work with Greg [Coomer] and with EJ [Erik Johnson], and I can't imagine doing anything that would be more fun than working with the people who are here. If I got on a boat and sailed around the world, I'd probably drown myself about two weeks into it. I can't think of anything that I'd enjoy doing more [than being here].




# DEVELOPERS' CHOICE 2013

Developers on their favourite developers

## Dan Pinchbeck

**Creative director, thechineseroom**



"I loved *Metro 2033* so much and am more excited about *Last Light* than any other game. What 4A do incredibly well is atmosphere – they just nail that immersive, world-spinning thing that's so hard to define and even harder to do well. So many games have all the right ingredients but just fail to make that transition into a space that feels like it just has a life and soul. 4A got that in *Metro*."

## Kepa Auwae

**Owner, Rocketcat Games**

"Three independent developers I really respect and admire are Derek Yu, Auntie Pixelante and Edmund McMillen. Their work is responsible for me trying to make games for a living, starting over three years ago now. Edmund McMillen recently had lots of success with *Super Meat Boy* and *The Binding Of Isaac*, but even before that he was still making a living working on whatever projects he wanted to. Auntie Pixelante inspired me in the same way – she made games for a living and worked exclusively on projects that were important or interesting to her. Their successes were what made me think that maybe I could make games, too. Derek Yu is a little different. *Spelunky* just really captured me. Both in that it was an important game, in its design, and that it saddened me a lot that I doubted I'd see anything like it from big studios. They'd just never make something like it. I really wanted to eventually make something with the same design tenets, so that helped [make] the final push in me getting into game design."

## Jeffrey Yohalem

**Writer, Ubisoft Montreal**



"*Journey*, by thatgamecompany, melded gameplay and story [really well]. The epic experience of travelling alone through life on a journey toward death, and the small amount of companionship from others that gives warmth in the wilderness was beautifully told through gameplay. Blendo Games is an up-and-coming developer. Its *Thirty Flights Of Loving* is a powerful experimental game, as is *Gravity Bone*. These are signposts along the road to come. [And] Naughty Dog and their *Uncharted* series. I admire them for injecting games with warm emotions and drive to constantly surprise players. And I love Ubisoft's fearless drive to push the medium forward toward art."



## Terry Cavanagh

**Independent designer**

"I'm really impressed by Michael Brough's work this year. I was already a fan – his game *The Sense Of Connectedness* from the end of last year was incredibly inspiring – but this year, between *Zaga-33*, *Game Title*, *Vesper.5* and everything else, he's completely outdone himself."



## Adam Saltsman

**Independent designer**



"My favourite developer right now is Zach Gage. People know him for *SpellTower*, but he's made so many other great games too – *Bit Pilot* (an endless and minimalist arcade game) and Guts Of Glory (a super-deep boardgame) especially. I've been privy to some amazing unreleased prototypes as well. He makes the sort of games I like to make, only better. Honourable mentions to Christine Love, Sophie Houlden, Emily Short, Bennett Foddy, Michael Brough and Terry Cavanagh."

## Jakub Dvorský

**Designer/ artist, Amanita Design**



"I admire many indie developers who are brave enough to leave their well-paid jobs and try it on their own with something original and risky. To name just a few: Colin Northway (*Incredipede*), [a] great experimenter; Patrick Smith (*Windosill*), Arnt Jensen (*Limbo*) and Craig Adams (*Sword & Sworcery EP*), [all] pure artists; Jon Blow (*Braid*), [a] clever game designer; Ron Carmel (*World Of Goo*), [the] guru of all indie developers; Ed Key and David Kanaga (*Proteus*) – gods."

## Todd Harris

**COO, Hi-Rez Studios**



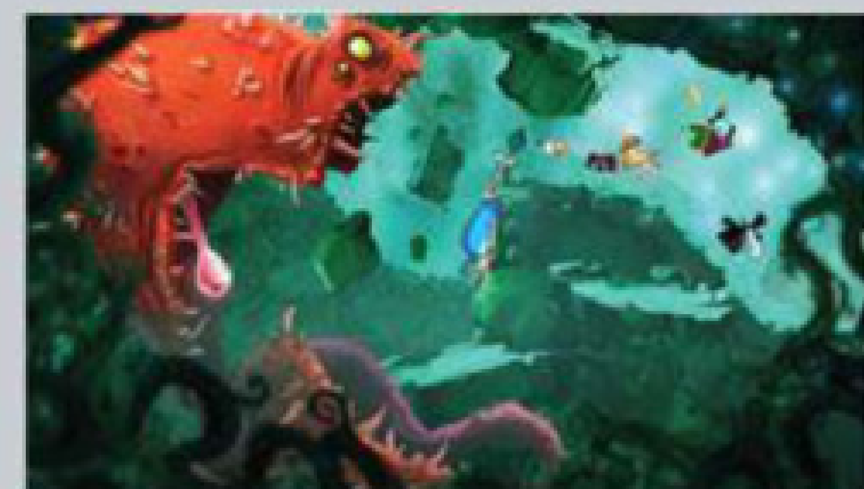

"Notch, the creator of *Minecraft*. The game industry is changing rapidly and *Minecraft* exemplifies how all these disruptive changes can be great for consumers and the developer as well. Here is a game created out of passion, distributed digitally over the Internet, released very early and improved with frequent new updates, marketed by the community thanks to YouTube videos, and improved by the community thanks to texture packs and mods. Plus, it keeps my kids entertained for hours!"

## Jordan Mechner

**Creator, *Prince Of Persia***



"I love the Ubisoft team that made *Rayman Origins*. They're a small studio in Montpellier, France, led by creative director Michel Ancel. They developed the UbiArt engine with the goal of making beautiful 2D games at a manageable cost. I really admire the way the team combines strong individual personalities and talents with crazy perfectionism and attention to detail without losing sight of the fun."



## Jean Guesdon

**Creative director, Ubisoft Montreal**

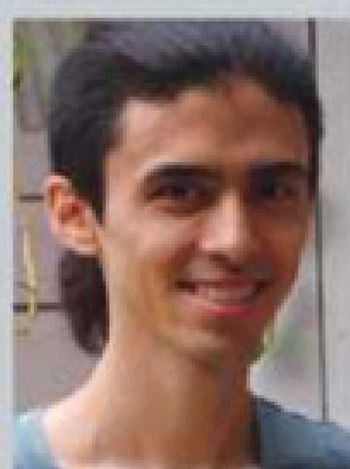


"Question: which developer inspires me the most? Equation: (Gabe and vision, plus talent, plus work) multiplied by (team, plus T-shape workers, plus handbook for new employees, plus creative, plus out-of-the-box, plus academic economist) divided by (player-centric, plus fun, plus sense-of-purpose, plus storytelling, plus playtest, plus polish, plus quality first, plus service) equals (Steam, plus Source, plus *Half-Life*, plus *Team Fortress*, plus *Portal*, plus *L4D* plus…) Solution: Valve!"



## Justin Ma

***FTL* co-creator**



"One of the studios that I admire is thatgamecompany. Their games are imaginative and beautifully executed, but it's their approach to developing games that I find so interesting. During GDC 2012, a talk was given on the early development of *Journey*, explaining its origins as an experiment in getting online gamers to want to cooperate. Every aspect of the design, from the challenges to the need for a sandy environment, stemmed from that simple goal. I felt that was an incredible way to approach game design and it made a huge impression on me."


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# PLAY

## REVIEWS. INTERVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. AND SOME NUMBERS

## STILL PLAYING

**Dark Souls** 360, PC, PS3
A new recruit – one of the last **Edge** staffers to succumb – goes some way to justifying FromSoftware's desire to make the sequel more accessible. Each morning brings a lengthy list of questions, met with patient explanations and gentle guidance. There's great appeal in that mystique – and we're only too happy to vicariously relive those tentative first steps in *Dark Souls* – but would it hurt it to be more legible at times?

**Far Cry 3** 360, PC, PS3
What better way to forget the driving rain and dank cold of midwinter than by spending time on a sun-washed tropical island? *Far Cry 3*'s success as an escapist fantasy is in no small part down to its physical approach to the firstperson perspective, in which you feel every thump and fall Brody receives. Our favourite effect is plunging deep into water, but we're still absolutely terrified of those sharks.

**Dishonored** 360, PC, PS3
It's good to be reminded by Trials Of Dunwall, *Dishonored*'s new DLC challenge mode, that under the strong story and atmosphere of our game of 2012 lies a tightly designed and coherent set of mechanics that can easily bend to score attack. We'll admit that it's also a pleasure to get to use Corvo's exquisite talents for murdering without experiencing a sneaking sense of guilt.



## REVIEWED THIS ISSUE





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# Reinvention is the guiding principle of the mainstream

There's a simple design exercise that involves writing down the names of 100 key games, putting them into a bag and drawing two out. Participants then have to prototype a game that merges key aspects of both. Maybe it sounds silly written here in red on white, but it's a far more useful process than you'd think, because it essentially simulates how mainstream development works.

*PlanetSide 2* (p94) is a firstperson shooter grafted into an MMOG universe of open landscapes and endless war. It's not the first to combine these elements, but with its continental structure and 6,000-player servers, it is the first to adequately represent both of its constituent parts. The result is a fascinatingly formless and shifting arena, in which miniature FPS skirmishes merge into huge conflicts like pools of oil on the surface of a puddle. *PlanetSide 2* is effectively an experiment in emergent player behaviours; new playstyles and player cultures will form, and this in turn will lead to new design concepts.



Similarly, with *DmC* (p98), Ninja Theory has taken on a legendary combat structure and applied to it the immediacy and narrative style of *Heavenly Sword* and *Enslaved*. The result is entirely unoriginal, but its devil/angel system clarifies attack options in a way that makes us confident to experiment. Those who feared *DmC* would wreck the memory of the series may now have to concede that it could well save the genre. Meanwhile, *Ace Of Spades* (p110) grafts *Minecraft* to *Team Fortress 2*, albeit with a far lower degree of success.

Mainstream game design rarely advances in great leaps, instead progress tends to be much more dialectical. Often the real skill is not in building something from scratch, but in figuring out how to bolt old stuff together well. Genius in this field doesn't only steal, it combines.

# PlanetSide 2

*PlanetSide 2* is a captivating marriage of the persistent world of an MMOG, the free-to-play financial model and the twitch combat of a firstperson shooter. Each of its three continents supports up to 2,000 players, and the scale is dizzying. Infantry and tanks clash on the ground, while aircraft streak across the sky. It's the kind of spectacle that most shooters rely on scripted setpieces to create, but here every explosion, tank battle and dogfight is a moment created wholly by players.

Three armies – the Terran Republic, the Vanu Sovereignty, and the New Conglomerate – battle to hold territory on these colossal continents, each force's territory represented on *PlanetSide 2*'s map screen by a group of hexagons in its signature colour. The result is a complex honeycomb of ever-changing hues as the sides capture and lose military installations, bridges, and more. It's a world that's always in motion, changing as players' actions dictate, not at the behest of planned world events. You can log out with a comfy grip over large swathes of the map, only to return a few hours later and find your faction backed into a corner.

Such scale has certain implications, such as making teamwork absolutely intrinsic to capturing enemy-controlled areas. The flip side of this is that *PlanetSide 2* can feel lonely and aimless for a solo player, and there's a limited amount you can accomplish all on your own. There's also initially a lot to process and there's no in-game tutorial to help the bewildered; once you've created a character, the game detects the busiest battle on your server and drops you right in the middle of it. Don't be surprised if you're shot dead within seconds of your first spawn.

You can join squads with random players, but it's rare that you'll find one willing to discuss tactics. It's when you're playing with friends using voice chat that the game is at its best. With enough people, you can ignore the larger conflicts and pick your own targets – perhaps a lonely enemy base in a distant corner of the map. However, the moment you enter their territory, an icon will blink on the enemy's map to alerting them to your presence, and they'll be able to drop in and defend it. It's not uncommon for these small, localised skirmishes to quickly escalate into ferocious hundred-player wars as troops from both sides rush in to help.

Above squads there are platoons. These can be made up of three squads of ten, which makes for some thrilling moments when everyone comes together and assaults the enemy en masse. Larger still are outfits, which are essentially guilds. Commanders can place target markers that are visible to all players in their team and, by advancing through a dedicated skill tree, can drop portable spawn points. But even with this Russian doll hierarchy in place, the action can still feel chaotic, and it's too easy to lose track of your friends in

**Publisher** Sony Online Entertainment
**Developer** In-house
**Format** PC
**Release** Out now

**www.bit.ly/UVG90U**
Screenshot gallery

Rows of tanks perch on ridges of deep, yawning valleys, firing back and forth while infantry clash below



the hysteria of battle. Their position is displayed on the mini-map and HUD, but there are so many icons onscreen in busy areas that it's difficult to locate allies at a glance when you're under fire and need help.

Readability is another problem caused by *PlanetSide 2*'s size. Despite all the coloured armour, it's hard to determine who you're attacking and what class they are – and friendly fire is enabled by default. In *Team Fortress 2*, the moment you see the telltale silhouette of a Heavy ahead, you subconsciously adjust your tactics to deal with him. Here, the classes all look alike, especially from a distance. That dark spot ahead could be a light assault trooper that you have a chance of winning a firefight with, or it could be a sniper with his sights hovering over your head. With so many players running around, distinction between factions and classes should be much clearer, especially when a second's delay in a firefight means certain death. Cosmetic armour upgrades and custom vehicle textures only add to the confusion.

**The combat itself** is vastly improved over the original. Weapons have a physicality to them, with sniper rifle bullet drop and missiles losing momentum the farther they travel. The armoury does feel oddly underpowered, though. You'll empty an entire magazine into an enemy and their shield will barely take a dent, let alone their health. Even vehicles and the mech-like MAX suit left us feeling flimsy and vulnerable. It's disheartening to spend Resources – an in-game currency earned at set intervals, or by killing enemies and capturing territory – on a heavy tank only to be blown to pieces in seconds by a passing aircraft. When you lose a vehicle, a timer prevents you from spawning another for up to 20 minutes, only adding to the upset.

Even so, vehicles are often the source of the game's most memorable moments. On the icy continent of Esamir, rows of tanks will perch on opposite ridges of deep, yawning valleys, firing back and forth while infantry clash in the centre. At desperate moments, pinned down in an enemy base with no hope of pushing back their defensive line, the sight of a fleet of friendly aircraft soaring overhead, or a column of tanks rumbling into view, is intoxicating.

Sunderers bring a similar feeling of relief. These bulky armoured personnel carriers might not look like much, but they're arguably the most important vehicle on the battlefield. They can be driven deep into enemy territory and transformed into mobile spawn points or vehicle repair stations. They're incredibly thick-skinned and can drive away from danger while players defend them with mounted anti-armour and anti-infantry guns. A strategically placed Sunderer can turn a battle around, and they're vital to making a steady, relentless push against one of the game's capture points – but to





ABOVE The Flash is a lightweight all-terrain vehicle that's available to each of the game's factions, and proves handy for crossing rough terrain quickly. You remain vulnerable to enemy fire while riding one, however




TOP The Vanu are the most alien of *PlanetSide*'s three factions, and their Scythe looks like it could easily belong to *Halo*'s Covenant. ABOVE Engineers can deploy anti-armour and anti-infantry mobile turrets as well as repair damaged vehicles for the good of their team. RIGHT The Liberator airship can seat three people: a pilot, a gunner, and a tailgunner. An upgrade allows them to drop bombs as well



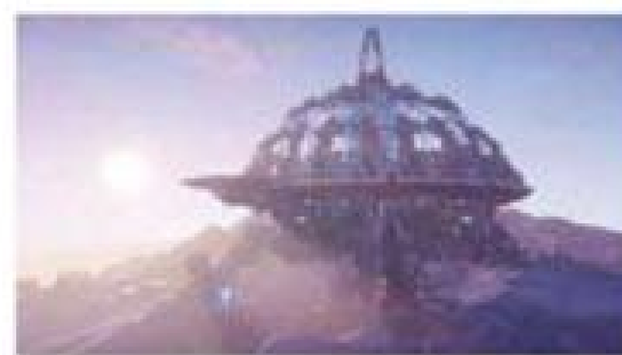
ABOVE If you find yourself in a tight spot, you can redeploy without the penalty of death or a suicide. Drop pods throw you directly into the action, although the beta saw complaints about using the vehicles as bombs

take advantage of its important mobile spawn feature, you'll need Certifications, an in-game currency.

It's all part of *PlanetSide 2*'s free-to-play economy. Every class, faction, continent, and vehicle is available to all players from the start, but you can buy additional weapons and items with SOE's Station Cash currency. Certifications, on the other hand, can only be earned through play. These are required for most upgrades, such as scopes and foregrips for weapons. Everything you can buy with Station Cash you can earn by playing, but it's a grind. A gun costs, on average, 700 Certs, and you might earn 50 in an hour of play if you do particularly well. This makes the £4 to buy it outright seem much more appealing.

**You can't pay** your way to victory, though. For one, *PlanetSide 2* is first and foremost a firstperson shooter, and reaction times and dexterity will always triumph over what gear you have equipped. Also, every weapon you purchase has a weakness as well as a strength. A new sniper rifle for the Infiltrator might cause more damage, but at the expense of having to reload after each shot. A carbine rifle may make a Light Assault player more effective at medium range, but it holds less ammo. This 'sidegrade' system keeps things balanced, but does mean there's a noticeable lack of variety between weapons, with only very slight stat variations.

*PlanetSide 2*'s launch was marred, like most MMOGs, with server capacity problems. If you could get into a game at all, you'd often be unceremoniously booted out. Since then, the network issues have mostly cleared up. Occasionally you'll be shot dead before you've even seen the enemy in front of you, and players will sometimes vanish and reappear a few steps ahead of themselves, but in terms of overall stability, it's much more reliable. There are around 30 servers, split into regions, and you can have three active characters at any one time. Cleverly, you can't have two characters of opposing factions on the same server. This stops mischievous players switching sides mid-battle to sabotage their own team for the benefit of the other.



LAND MASS
Each of the game's three continents has its own distinct geography, and there's a realtime day/night cycle. Esamir is an expanse of icy tundra where the northern lights glow in the sky at night. Indar is an arid desert with rocky canyons that skilled aircraft pilots can use to escape enemies on their tail. Amerish is a verdant land of green forests and sloping hills. You can travel between them freely by accessing a warpgate terminal in each faction's home base. These enormous, shield-protected domes are out of bounds to other factions, and they can't be captured.

Naturally, the game suffers if there aren't many people online, and weekends are usually the best time to play. During peak hours you won't have to look far for a battle to join, but on less populated servers it's difficult to get enough people together to capture territory effectively. Engaged players are crucial to *PlanetSide 2*'s continued success. You can run around an empty *World Of Warcraft* map and still busy yourself with solo questing, but teamwork is so essential in *PlanetSide 2* that it's nothing without its players. If the player base dies, so does the game.

For the moment, though, SOE's MMOG is a remarkable achievement. Games like it often have to sacrifice visual fidelity for performance, but *PlanetSide 2* looks stunning, even on medium settings. We've never experienced virtual warfare on such a grand scale in a videogame before – even if this isn't always a good thing. New players are badly catered for, and relegating tutorials to a series of external YouTube videos, rather than teaching you the game's many complex systems in a more direct way, will put a lot of people off. But as you grow accustomed to the rhythm of its territorial tug of war and find a solid group to play with, few games can prove as exhilarating to play.

**8**

# Post Script

## How PlanetSide 2 strips the mistrust from free-to-play

At the time of writing, if you wanted to buy every weapon in *PlanetSide 2* for a faction, you'd have to spend around £200. That's a lot of money, but since many weapons are only slight variations of others, it's unlikely you'd ever spend that much. Really dedicated players might buy half of what's on offer, and that amounts to roughly the same cost as a year's *World Of Warcraft* subscription.

Weapons are, understandably, the most expensive things in the game, and the hardest to earn using in-game currency. You'll have to spend up to 1,000 Certifications to unlock one, whether for infantry or vehicles, which would take many hours of playing. It's a shrewd business model. Players will weigh up hours of grinding with a quick, one-off microtransaction, and many will settle for the latter. Buying every cosmetic upgrade – including coloured camouflage, gaudy hood ornaments for vehicles, and skull-shaped helmets – will set you back an additional £230. However, these items can only be bought with Station Cash, which is paid for with real money. It obviously has an attraction: the battlefields are full of proud players showing off their elaborate camo patterns and armour add-ons.

But these figures assume a player hasn't taken advantage of bundles and special offers. As we write this, a vehicle starter pack is on sale with a 60 per cent discount over buying the items separately. This contains upgraded weapons for a variety of vehicles as well as camouflage. The storefront also offers timed deals that change every few hours.

There's also the opportunity to become a premium member. A monthly account costs £9 and comes with some appealing benefits. Every month you get 500 Station Cash, and you can get up to 50 per cent bonus XP, Certifications and resources, which ramps up to this maximum the longer you keep your membership active. You also receive the ability to skip ahead of free players if there's a queue on your server.

SOE's motto is 'free-to-play your way', a phrase it's trademarked. The bottom of the *PlanetSide* website reads, "Our philosophy is simple: free games, no commitment, and if you want to buy, it's on your terms." Such statements make SOE seem keen to distance itself from the stigma of F2P, where you often feel like you're being bullied into buying things, or somehow hamstrung if you don't – and it works. You can enjoy so much of *PlanetSide 2* without spending a penny, but the company know that once you've been sucked in you will undoubtedly reach for your wallet. Still, it doesn't feel cynical, and double XP weekends – an apologetic reaction to the server woes that plagued the game's launch late last year – reveal a developer which understands its community's feelings.

You don't have to worry about wealthy players decked out in impenetrable armour with dual rapid-fire rocket launchers



The biggest problem here lies in how similar the weapons are. When you buy, say, a hero in *League Of Legends*, it feels distinct from the others, with its own lore and specialist uses on the battlefield. In *PlanetSide 2*, it's a bit of an anticlimax to spend money on yet another identical-looking Terran rifle with a slightly longer range. Only a handful of items – such as the Sunderer's mobile spawn or missiles for aircraft – feel like a significant upgrade.

But this lack of variety does, at least, provide some balance. You don't have to worry about wealthy players decked out in impenetrable armour with dual rapid-fire rocket launchers. The only item that could be considered 'pay to win', but in a very loose sense, are the boosts. For 500 Station Cash you get a seven-day experience point booster for your own character. For 700, you can boost your entire squad.

This makes ranking up and earning Certifications a much speedier process, which in turn gives you quicker access to weapon attachments such as red dot sights and recoil-steadying foregrips, as well as more powerful vehicle add-ons. The base weapon for each class is functional, but bland, and this can be true of vehicles. The Terran Mosquito, the faction's fast-moving fighter, starts out with a weak machine-gun, but plug in some Hellfire missiles and it becomes much more formidable.

***PlanetSide 2* is**, for a free-to-play game, remarkably generous. Even major publishers such as EA still struggle to make the system appealing. Its MMORPG, *Star Wars: The Old Republic* - which went free-to-play in November, less than a year after launch, after subscriber numbers began to dwindle – included so many restrictions to free accounts that it soon had to loosen some of them to maintain appeal. Even so, increasing one quickslot bar to two feels like a token gesture. In *The Old Republic*, as a free player you feel like an outcast; in *PlanetSide 2*, you know you're just as effective in a battle and able to have as much fun as a player who's paying to be there.

Inclusivity is what makes a free-to-play game great. Developers don't have to lock parts of their game away to ensure profit; people will buy things regardless of how much is open to free players. The amount of players with customised gear in *PlanetSide 2* is evidence of this. If you don't buy a single weapon or upgrade, you'll still get many hours of play out of it, providing you get over the initial hump of aimless confusion.

The free-to-play model brings with it many difficult balances, and *PlanetSide 2* is one of the best attempts yet. It would work just as well as a standalone game with a traditional unlock system, and it neither lives nor dies by its free-to-play status. ■

# DmC: Devil May Cry

Any lingering concerns you may have about Ninja Theory's restyled Dante will fade within the first few hours. This, despite involving surely the most controversial haircut in videogame history, is still a *Devil May Cry* game, and a good one. This Dante may be the brattish, obnoxious sort of cocky, but only at the outset, when he's the orphan with the sad past who's gone off the rails, spending his days in a trailer park and his nights in strip clubs. Nothing, though, focuses the wayward mind quite like being dragged into Limbo by a demon the size of a skyscraper or two.

This being the first boss, naturally Dante finds his way out of purgatory and back to the real world, but he'll spend much of *DmC* switching between the two dimensions. He's joined by Kat, a waifish young thing who takes the role of *Enslaved*'s Trip, often pointing out or opening the way, and also grounding our half-demon, half-angel hero in the real world. He is a more human protagonist than in the past, one who fights to avenge the death of his mother and, later, to save a friend. The Dante of old seemed to be in it for the glory, and because he liked looking good while pissing off demons. If that meant saving the world, then fine.

Kat introduces Dante to Vergil, his long-lost brother, who's been cast a terrorist by obvious Fox News analogue Raptor News Network, and in particular Bob Barbas, Raptor's Bill O'Reilly. Barbas's catchphrase that he's "just doing God's work" falls flat when it turns out that he is, in fact, a corrupt and quite colossal demon. His 'god' is Mundus, demon king and head of the Silver Sacks investment bank, who spends his introduction proclaiming he is going to "control the world through debt". Clearly, times have changed: these days, Satan's most terrifying powers lie in his prohibitive APR and a thorough credit check. The message, then, is that the media is evil, the financial services industry is worse, and sometimes terrorists really are freedom fighters.

*DmC* has a greater emphasis on story than the games that preceded it, then, which is just what you'd expect from the maker of the narrative-heavy *Enslaved* and *Heavenly Sword*. But its focus is absolutely where it should be: at the tip of Dante's sword. Playing true to its forebears' considerable strengths, *DmC* is still a game about crowd management and of making best use of its myriad systems to keep a combo going and maximise your style rating.

And so while *DMC4*'s Devil Bringer grappling hook is absent, the concept remains. Hold the left trigger and hit X for angelic lift, which zips you towards enemies. Hold the right and X to have demonic pull draw foes in close. These are used outside of battle, too, helping you move between the platforms of one crumbling structure to the next, all aided by a midair boost.

After it enjoyed such success in the PS2 era, it's been a quiet generation for the thirdperson brawler, but in the four years since *DMC4* much has changed, and you keenly feel *Bayonetta*'s influence in *DmC*. Not just stylistically – the frequent collisions between Limbo and the real world mean Dante spends much of his time travelling through crumbling cities, the dumbstruck populace visible but intangible – but mechanically as well. There's greater emphasis on air combos: the sky is often the safest place to be, and the pull, lift and double jump make it easier than ever to stay airborne. There's no Witch Time, but score and damage bonuses are given for perfectly timed dodges. And while Platinum's balletic witch had to pay a premium for her parry bracelet, Dante can counter enemy attacks from the start by precisely timing a strike of his own.

**Publisher** Capcom
**Developer** Ninja Theory
**Format** 360 (tested), PC, PS3
**Release** Out now


**www.bit.ly/Uatade**
Screenshot gallery

DmC has an emphasis on story but its focus is absolutely where it should be: at the tip of Dante's sword



**Dante's arsenal has** been expanded, too. Squeeze the left trigger and his sword is sheathed for angelic weapon attacks – first from a scythe called Osiris, and later from Aquila, essentially a pair of *Rage*'s wingsticks. Demonic weapons are accessed via the right trigger, activating either the hulking Arbiter axe or Eryx, a pair of gauntlets with chargeable attacks. Broadly speaking, angelic weapons are fast and for crowd control, with the demonic ones slower, more direct, and harder-hitting.

Elusive triple-S ranks are more easily attainable than before, aided by the ease with which you can switch between the tools at your disposal. Squeeze a trigger to trade your sword for an axe; tap the D-pad to replace the axe with gauntlets. It's a more forgiving game than previous *DMC*s, too, with audiovisual cues that signal enemy attacks coming louder and clearer, as well as generously spaced checkpoints – on default difficulty, anyway. Son Of Sparda, the fourth of seven tiers of challenge, throws the toughest enemies at you from the first level on, and spaces out its checkpoints. The series hasn't been dumbed down so much as retuned.

The controls can let you down, with *DmC* a little fussy in when it chooses to recognise a trigger squeeze. This is usually no great loss in the thick of combat – one hit's often as good as another – but it can cause a few plunges into the abyss during platforming sections. A good job, then, that you're instantly popped back on a nearby platform in exchange for a chunk of health. But certain later enemies are immune to all but one weapon type, which is limiting and makes for some tiresome battles, and the larger foes can fall into the same trap, turning fights into mere pattern recognition.

These, though, are minor complaints in the context of the job Ninja Theory had on its hands. This, it was claimed after we first saw the new Dante, is a genre that could only truly be understood by Japanese studios, doomed to fail. What an overreaction that was to a makeover and some dubstep. This is the best entry in its genre since *Bayonetta*, and might just be the best game Ninja Theory has made to date.

**8**

ABOVE Unreal Engine 3 is getting on a bit, but this is a looker of a game at times. It's at it's best when it can cast off any pretence of realism, such as this hyper-stylised, watercolour vision of Limbo.



LEFT The series-staple heavy metal gives way to what we're supposed to call aggrotech, an electronic take on metal performed by Norway's Combichrist and co. Dutch trio Noisia provide most of the soundtrack for this dubstep-heavy trip through a demonic nightclub

BELOW Get used to seeing roads, buildings and cities being torn asunder in front of you. Normally this means going round the long way, or some platforming, but sometimes it's a battle against the clock, demanding speed of thought and movement to escape alive



ABOVE Despite the breadth of our arsenal, we can't help starting all of our combos with Rebellion, the sword that's always been at Dante's side. Those looking to mix things up will find a detailed combo list in the pause menu





*DmC*'s camera often pulls back to reveal vast expanses like this, but you're almost always following a fixed central route

# Post Script

## Why a western touch was exactly what Dante needed

At last, it's paid off. For years Capcom has been outsourcing development to the west in the hope of striking a balance between the intricately woven systems of a Japanese game and the polished production values for which western studios are renowned. And for years it has failed.

Perhaps that's a little harsh. OK, Slant Six's *Operation Raccoon City* is arguably the worst *Resident Evil* game to ever sully a disc, but most of Capcom's western games have been nothing worse than average. Grin's *Bionic Commando*? Fine. Backbone Entertainment's *Super Street Fighter II Turbo HD Remix* did the job it was supposed to do, curious balance changes aside. Capcom was so pleased with Blue Castle's work on *Dead Rising 2* that it bought the studio outright, renaming it Capcom Vancouver.

After *DmC: Devil May Cry*, it should consider picking up Ninja Theory, too. This, surely, is precisely the sort of thing Keiji Inafune, the former head of global production at Capcom and a long-time critic of Japanese development's decline, had in mind when he stepped up the publisher's work with western studios. *DmC* shows that you can make a thoroughly hardcore game more accessible without diluting what makes it special – all it takes is a few subtle nips and tucks.

Because *DMC* as a series had problems. For a start, it made its roots as a *Resident Evil* game too obvious, a student of the Insert Occult Object To Continue school of thought, with all the backtracking that implies. That reached its logical, ridiculous conclusion in *DMC4*, when players spent half of the game guiding Dante through the same levels they'd already taken Nero through. In Ninja Theory's game, you follow your nose.

Gone, too, is the late-game boss rush, an unwelcome throwback to the 16bit days when action games belonged to Japan, and the reliance on pace-shattering puzzles. The secret missions – once entirely hidden and discoverable only by bumping hopefully into walls and scenery, or resorting to a walkthrough – are now stashed in plain sight, locked behind doors whose missing keys represent the game's only real puzzles. Even then, they're quick, environmental ones that rarely take you far from the beaten track.

Sorting out the pacing and the puzzles is unlikely to upset too many hardcore *DMC* players, however. Some, it seems, come for the hair and the coat; most, though, are in thrall to its combat system, and it's here that Ninja Theory ran the most risk of failure. It's also here that Capcom offered to impart its development experience.

Some may mourn the loss of Dante's switchable fighting styles and the replay value they afforded, but the hero that remains has elements of many at once. A Royalguard-style parry is here, as is a Trickster-like dodge. The weapon-specific Gunslinger and Swordmaster are gone, but many of their signature attacks have been folded into the move list. Which is the more hardcore: a palette of switchable styles, or one moveset that contains their best bits, and more besides?

These are the sorts of changes you'd expect a western studio to make to a Japanese game. Ninja Theory has spent the past few years trimming Dante's fat, not cutting his muscle, refining rather than undermining a much-loved series. Many of these are changes that Capcom either wouldn't realise were needed or wouldn't make for fear of alienating its existing fanbase. This is precisely why the publisher has spent the last half a decade farming out development to western studios.

Inafune says he left because risk aversion had grown to such an extent that he couldn't get anything greenlit that wasn't a sequel to an established IP. Perhaps the next best thing to making something new is sending something halfway round the world to a different culture; sometimes all a project needs is the benefit of a fresh pair of eyes. ■





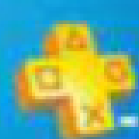


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# The Walking Dead

**Publisher** Telltale Games
**Developer** In-house
**Format** 360 (version tested), Mac, PC, PS3, iOS
**Release** Out now

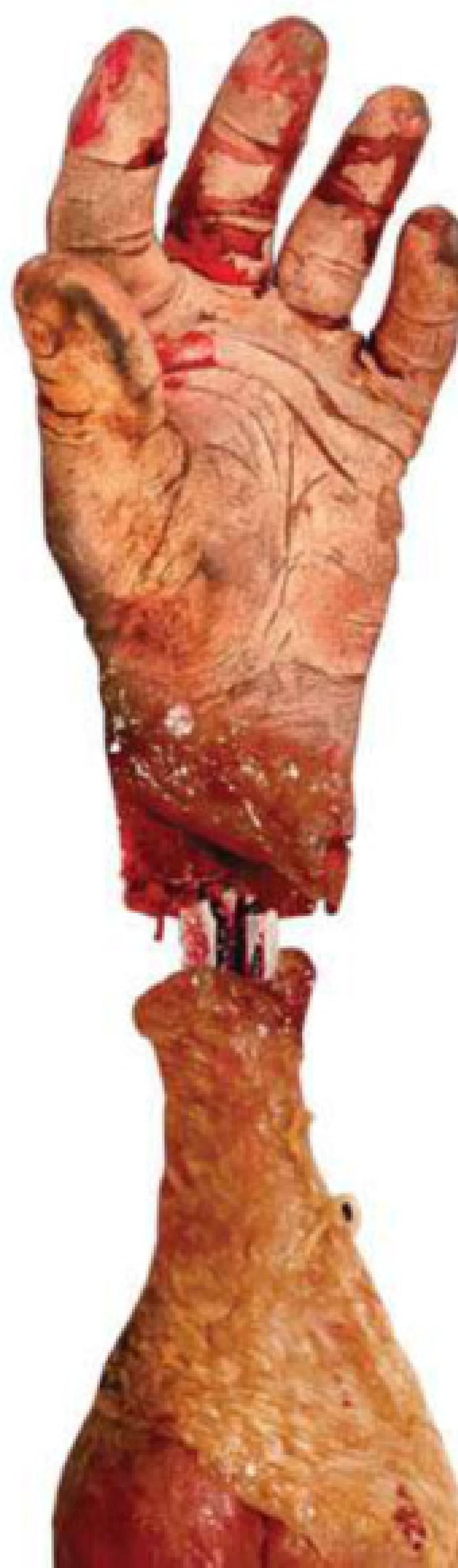
With the skyline of downtown Atlanta receding into the distance behind the police cruiser, the officer at the wheel adjusts the rear-view mirror to get a better look at the convict in the back seat. Lee Everett is a former university history professor, probably in his early 40s, and he's clearly got a lot on his mind. "Well, I reckon you didn't do it then," the officer finally says, breaking the silence. With those eight words, the game hatches a thousand questions. Could this careworn man have committed a crime worthy of a prison sentence? What's going to happen to him? Or rather, since we're role-playing as Everett, what's going to happen to us? With the recent release of the complete first season of *The Walking Dead*, players who have not yet had the pleasure of discovering these answers have a five-course feast waiting.

Though we know the phrase 'walking dead' refers to zombies – who have yet to make their appearance – it could just as easily refer to Everett. In jailhouse parlance, of course, the phrase 'dead man walking' refers to a person who's been convicted and is waiting for their sentence to be carried out, or is already marching heavyheartedly to the gallows. A similar sense of doom and inevitability hangs over the proceedings here. We can identify with Lee Everett in a way that we never will with even the most sensitively written of space marines. Storytellers in other media have no qualms about spinning yarns that focus on seemingly ordinary human beings, and *The Walking Dead* offers a powerful reminder that games shouldn't either.

Our chauffeur is chatty and full of questions, which we answer in turn via quartets of dialogue options. The game informs us that silence is also a valid option. Where it departs from typical RPG conventions is the finite response window. Every time we're prompted for a response, a small white timer bar begins to drain, which lends immediate tension. *The Walking Dead* is not a game where you can tune out and browse Twitter on your phone during cutscenes. You could be called on for a response at a moment's notice. Our potential replies to the police officer are all benign, but very soon we will be forced to process much heavier calculations as the hourglass sand trickles away – whether to lie or tell the truth, where to cast our allegiance in disputes, or even who we'll elect to save when two companions' lives are at stake and there isn't time to help both.

*The Walking Dead* is at its best when it's flattering your ego with heady decision-making. As gamers, we enjoy playacting the part of the hedge fund manager picking up ringing phones and shouting either "buy" or "sell" into each one. We're important. We're the Decider-In-Chief. If you only have a few paltry snacks allocated for a given day, what it would feel like to not just choose who gets to eat, but physically hand them out, suffering the forlorn stares of the neglected?

We can identify with Everett in a way that we never will with even the most sensitively written of space marines



The game is less exceptional, however, when it's time to fight for your life. Combat is mostly handled via QTEs, which aren't magically redeemed simply because the scenarios in which they're couched happen to be riveting. For example, you might need to hammer a particular button repeatedly to push a 'walker' off you, or force a door shut that's being bombarded by hordes of undead. Can't we just shoot this convention in the head and hope it doesn't come lurching back to life?

Alternately, in the combat interactions that don't lean on QTEs, you might be pinned to the ground by a walker and the game wants you to find a makeshift weapon on the ground nearby. There will be a precise node onscreen where you need to click before time runs out, and it's not always vividly apparent. Using an analogue stick to push your pointer reticule around the screen makes this an even more onerous task, but it unquestionably adds to the tension.

To be fair, the varieties of combat described above occupy a relatively narrow slice of *The Walking Dead* experience. Telltale draws its gameplay inspiration primarily from old-school point-and-click adventure games, which should come as no surprise given its founders' LucasArts pedigree. If you need to get into a locked door inside a barn, you'll need to find a tool to remove the hinge holding the lock in place, but then you'll also need to figure out how to trigger a diversion to lure away the man guarding the door. Searching the environment for these solutions involves a great deal of walking around – and, unfortunately, walking is the key word. Without the ability to sprint at will, Everett's movement outside of action sequences feels lethargic, artificially elongating the wait between consequential interactions. The multi-stage puzzles require some ingenuity, though, reinforcing the idea that surviving a zombie apocalypse requires mental synapses – and not just pistols – that fire quickly.

**Telltale's game does** a beautiful job of emulating the art style of Robert Kirkman's The Walking Dead comic book series. The visuals look hand-drawn, but not so cartoony that they undermine the grim subject matter. The zombies in *The Walking Dead* are not slapstick party piñatas; they're meant to be feared and respected. Characters in-game refer to them as 'walkers' instead of 'zombies'. Through a simple rechristening, Telltale divests its tale of the zombie genre's cultural baggage and imbues it with fresh gravitas.

Then again, *The Walking Dead* isn't really about the zombies, not centrally at least. Like much zombie fiction, Telltale's game is interested in human beings and how the imperative of survival reshapes their approach to community and ethical considerations. The post-apocalyptic milieu simply brings down the traditional system of law and order, which provides

RIGHT Watching how the story cements the familial bond between its two main characters, Lee and Clementine, despite them not actually being blood relatives is one of *The Walking Dead*'s most emotionally satisfying plot threads





ABOVE Kenny is probably the first character in any videogame to hail from Fort Lauderdale, Florida. The fact each of the characters has a past rooted in actual places makes them feel more three-dimensional. LEFT *The Walking Dead* is certainly not for the squeamish. Because the undead no longer look human, the violence visited upon them can be as graphic as the developers care to make it. Spoiler alert: Telltale opted for very graphic



BELOW The axe is the grisliest of the melee weapons you find yourself wielding in the game. It's not so much the strike that draws a wince as the work it takes to dislodge it from the walker's flesh



characters more latitude to think and act beyond the confines of the previously established moral consensus. Every option is on the table. There's a symbolic quality to the police man in the opening scene winding up dead. The law of the jungle can handle its own enforcement, thank you very much.

Early in episode one, Everett suddenly finds himself the custodian of a young girl named Clementine who's been separated from her parents, which lends an extra self-consciousness to all your decisions, like a parent whose child is watching. What example are you setting? The quest to try and reach Savannah and reunite her with her true family forms the narrative spine of these initial five episodes.

**Story-driven videogames** have long tried to give us the sense of meaningful choice, but *The Walking Dead* succeeds where so many others have failed. We can't remember being so frequently torn in how to respond from moment to moment. Telltale rephrases the age-old lifeboat hypothetical and scaffolds a riveting adventure game around it. If you're being forced to choose who lives, do you save the child who has more of their life ahead of them, or do you save an adult who's more physically capable and might aid your chances of survival? What if a party member has a heart condition or an injury that could compromise the well-being of the group? Should you throw them overboard like dead-weight cargo, or do you have a responsibility to hoist them on your shoulders and stumble on? Even if you can't decide, you'll still make a decision.

*The Walking Dead* doesn't just force you to make complicated moral judgements, but entices you to reflect on them as well. At the end of each episode, the



**PREVIOUSLY ON...**

The veneer of TV's episodic structure has been applied to games before. Remedy's *Alan Wake* took it one step further and applied the TV-inspired "previously on..." voiceover introduction to each recap. But even if you're just getting around to playing *The Walking Dead* and have no agonising wait between episodes, the structure still enhances the experience greatly by breaking up the story into digestible chunks. Five episodes means five cliffhangers, plus a variety of settings and scenarios. Patience is passé.

**ABOVE** Because Telltale's game shares the same universe as Kirkman's The Walking Dead comic series, you can expect cameos from characters who originated in the comics, such as former pizza delivery boy Glenn

game lists the five key decision moments and shows the statistical breakdown of how other players responded. To play *The Walking Dead* is to be desperately curious about how your friends played *The Walking Dead*. Who did they save? When there was no happy outcome, which of the horrible choices did they deem least repellent as the game pressed them for an answer. *The Walking Dead* is essentially a more cerebral adaptation of the Saw franchise's sadistic choice laboratory. Telltale's designers play the part of Jigsaw. You can imagine them holding clipboards and smirking behind reflective glass as they observe you gnashing your teeth over each quandary.

*The Walking Dead* eschews multiple endings, instead funnelling players towards a predetermined narrative destination. It would be tempting to begrudge the decision if episode five didn't conclude in such a satisfying, gut-wrenchingly cathartic fashion. You'd expect a game with so many forking decision paths to reward multiple playthroughs, but doing so actually spoils the illusion, revealing the sleight of hand behind Telltale's card trick. You might choose the right-hand fork, only to find it loops around the first tree and quickly merges once more with the left-hand path. Such revelations can rob your decisions of the sense of meaning they'd otherwise engender, so we'd recommend that you just enjoy a single glorious playthrough of season one and let that be your story. Even so, Telltale has achieved something remarkable – this series offered some of the most memorable hours we spent holding a gamepad during 2012.

**8**

# Ni No Kuni: Wrath Of The White Witch

Publisher Namco Bandai
Developer Level-5, Studio Ghibli
Format PS3
Release January 22 (US), 25 (EU)

*Ni No Kuni*'s White Witch peers into her crystal ball and says, "So, this is the child who will save the world," sneering at her pint-sized aggressor and his ill-matched ambition. The temptation is to sneer with her. Not at Oliver, the likeable 13-year-old called upon to save the fantasy world of Ni No Kuni in order to do the same for the life of his mother, but at the over-familiarity of the premise: the orphaned child at the precipice of puberty, who, in the words of the game's attract sequence, will "save a world, but must first save himself". For a story penned by Studio Ghibli, the animation house behind some of Japan's most enduring and critically acclaimed cinematic fairytales, the hope was for more of a twist in the tale.

But there is still gold to be found in clichés for those with a subversive eye and sparkling talent – virtues that Studio Ghibli and Level-5, its game development partner, do not lack. So while *Ni No Kuni*'s premise and systems are familiar at a glance, their quaintly rebellious execution, flair, and voice, plus the studio's meticulous detailing, make this a journey filled with fresh wonder.

Oliver resides in Motorville, a small but well-to-do American town. There's no year attributed to the setting but, judging by the style of the motorcars that sleepily cruise its streets, the vinyl-only record shop and the price of Idaho potatoes in the local greengrocers (35¢ for 10lbs), we're in the 1950s. It's a town of white picket fences, immaculate lawns and flower boxes. Its shops bear hand-drawn signs, the lampposts look like they were painted yesterday, and not only does everybody know everybody else by name, they also know all about their medical conditions and love lives.

Ghibli's strengths are all here, drawing a consistent and detailed world, while maintaining a rare clarity of storytelling. The key players, their motivations and fears are all introduced with an expert's hand. Oliver's ultimate goal is to save his mother following a tragic accident in the opening moments of the game. When it seems as though all hope is lost, his tears awaken his favourite toy, Mr Drippy, a tubby, saucer-eyed fairy with a small red lantern dangling from a ring in his snout. Drippy is one of the medium's great characters, defying his stature with a gigantic personality and a thick Welsh accent. He acts as Oliver's friend and guide, cheering him on from the sidelines in battle and providing humorous narration for the journey.

The two worlds between which the pair travel are inextricably linked. Actions performed in one affect the other: to find a missing cat king in the world of Ni No Kuni, Oliver may have to travel back to Motorville to search for the grocer's overweight tabby, Timmy Toldrum. A potential party member in Ni No Kuni's world may need her family problems solved in Oliver's town before her alter ego, or 'soul mate', has the mental and emotional strength to join in the adventure. This inter-dimensional travel isn't nearly so involved as in, say, *Chrono Cross*, but it provides texture and variety.

While Ni No Kuni's premise and systems are familiar, their flair and voice make this a journey filled with wonder



Battles – the typically tactical heart of any Japanese RPG, where friction and peril are to be found in the highest concentration – also play with their genre heritage. Oliver takes familiars, Pokémon-esque creatures that fight in his stead, into battle with him. Each can only fight for a limited amount of time, after which they must be stowed away to recover, leaving you to either use one of the other creatures or have Oliver employ his new-found wizardly skills and stand on his own. What first appears to be a simple system soon reveals satisfying depths. Strike your attack button while the command is flashing blue to indicate an incoming attack and you'll counter the move, nudging this JRPG towards action/fighting game territory.

**While you choose** commands from a menu list, you maintain full spatial control of your character in battle, dodging incoming projectiles and moving to collect the life- and magic-restoring orbs that spill from enemies like sweets from piñata. Outside of battles, you must feed and nurture your familiars, offering them sweets and buns to buff their stats to either compensate for areas of natural weakness, or to accentuate their strengths. Later in the game, other characters join in battle, and it's at this point that the fine grain of the battle system is fully revealed.

While Oliver's burgeoning magical skills are essential in combat, they also find uses off the battlefield. In addition to fire and healing spells, Oliver learns an ever-widening range of everyday magic – spells used to spring locks, rejuvenate tired objects and, crucially, remove emotions from or give them to people in the world. Many tasks involve finding a particularly enthusiastic or courageous denizen of Ni No Kuni, siphoning off some of their spirit with a simple spell, and infusing another, depressed character with its revitalising effects. This restorative work is captivating, as you work to save not only *Ni No Kuni*'s world, but also its people, one broken heart at a time.

Level-5 and Studio Ghibli's contributions are harmonious. As a game, *Ni No Kuni* builds upon classic JRPG foundations, eschewing the evolutions of *Xenoblade Chronicles* and *Final Fantasy XII*. But the assured flair with which Level-5 has implemented each of the game's classic components combines with Ghibli's masterful storytelling to deliver a JRPG that's quite unlike any other. And while the story may lean more heavily on cliché than Ghibli's film work, it retains the studio's innate ability to articulate the mental landscape of a child, and to relate that viewpoint back to adults in meaningful ways. A familiar tale in a familiar genre, then, but this is a game full of youthful wonder, imagination and thoughtfulness. **8**



ABOVE Young Oliver has to face a varied set of enemies on his path to becoming a wizard. Level-5 isn't afraid to let these beasts fill the frame at times, adding to the sense of majesty that some of the more fearsome bosses can conjure.




RIGHT You control your familiars' positions and attacks in realtime, with rewards for well-timed button presses. Alternatively, you can take Oliver into battle to use his magic directly on your foes

BELOW Oliver starts alone, other than with Drippy, but he's later joined by other human party members. You can switch familiars from character to character, creating powerful and diverse micro-teams within the squadron





ABOVE Ghibli's distinctive style is wonderfully evident throughout *Ni No Kuni*, with characters, colours and line art that echo its 2000s work. Expect shades of Howl's Moving Castle, Spirited Away and Arrietty here



No mere script translation, the world of *Ni No Kuni* is enriched by the careful Anglicisation of its story and dialogue

# Post Script

Level-5's commitment to localisation helps Ni No Kuni stand out

For years, localisation has been something of an afterthought, a task tagged onto the end of game development. Perhaps for this reason, publishers have long cut corners when it comes to translating dialogue-heavy Japanese games into English. There are famous examples of mistranslation, such as *Zero Wing*'s "All your base are belong to us" and *Final Fantasy VI*'s "spoony bard", but a no-frills attitude to localisation has been more pervasive, and less obvious, for decades.

It wasn't until the N64 era that Nintendo even began hiring professional writers, a change in policy brought about by Leslie Swan. She approached the development team working on bringing *Super Mario 64* to the US when she worked at Nintendo Power and suggested they hire a writer to work on the dialogue. In doing so, she landed herself a job as the head of Nintendo's localisation teams, with a sideline as Princess Peach's voice.

But masterful localisation is still rare, and *Ni No Kuni* stands apart for its intelligently translated text, considered use of dialect, and its employment of expressive, characterful voice actors. Mr Drippy has the standout role, his thick Welsh accent intended to reflect the yokel-ish Osaka intonation used in the Japanese original. The quality of the performance is such that unvoiced areas of the game, relying instead on written dialogue, leave the player reading the text in Drippy's spoken idiolect and mourning his absence.

*Ni No Kuni* should also be applauded for its detailed regard for cultural references. Both Level-5 and Studio Ghibli know that a misfiring social joke won't just be lost on an audience, but subtract from the experience. *Ni No Kuni* has the advantage of being set in the relative familiarity of an American town, but even so the localisation team's meticulous work is visible in the signage, shop prices and in the Motorville dialect, which feels like the natural language for this tale.

Localisation teams tend to only remove potentially offensive words or references permissible in Japan but unsuitable in a more conservative US context. *Chrono Trigger*'s alcoholic drinks were replaced by soft ones, and its pubs and bars repurposed to cafés. In *Xenogears*, controversial themes were softened. Its dark but clear parable of WWII was subdued in the American version, and references to young priests being molested by the clergy were removed.

There are no such issues with *Ni No Kuni*, but it's clear that the localisation team has been empowered to tailor the game for overseas audiences. *Dragon Quest VIII*, the first game in Japan's popular RPG series developed by Level-5, honed the studio's craft in this area. During the early stages of translation, creator Yuji Horii demanded that he personally approve all naming choices and changes to text. Over time, the translators and creator built up trust with each other, a maturing relationship that enabled the team to make sweeping changes to the English translation's tone, making the dialogue more natural and funnier to western audiences.

**Richard Honeywood**, who headed up the localisation, said at the time: "[Horii] worked with us to practically reinvent the game with British voiceovers, orchestral sound, new menu systems and added animations, and graphics not in the original Japanese release. If the team had just outsourced the translation, like Enix used to, the game would have come out as just another straight translation of the Japanese original. I believe [*Dragon Quest VIII*] is one of our greatest localisation masterpieces, and shows what happens when you work closely with the original creators."

*Ni No Kuni* acts as another winning example of a localisation team working closely with Japanese creators. It shows this work is as integral to a game's overseas success and atmosphere as the original scriptwriting, or indeed any other element that aims to communicate a virtual world and its drama. ■

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# Ace Of Spades

There's an elephant in *Ace Of Spades'* room, and it's Swedish and made of cubes. This FPS is very obviously influenced by *Minecraft*: players can destroy blocks with pickaxes and shovels, build new ones, and the levels are studded with primary-coloured cuboid versions of trees and towers. But where *Minecraft* is largely a lazily paced building toybox, *Ace Of Spades* is maniacally fast. Players bounce around at hyperactive speeds, and a low gravity setting means a stab of the spacebar carries you ten feet into the air.

The idea is simple: combine *Minecraft's* insidiously addictive building with the competition of a team-based arena shooter. It doesn't work in application. Neither of *Ace Of Spades'* core actions – building or shooting – is satisfying enough to maintain its appeal. Any great building projects are limited by either the restrictive time limits that close matches off before you can see your architectural dream come to fruition, or explosives-happy players, who'll see your structure and raze it simply for the pleasure of *Ace Of Spades'* most satisfying outcome: the pleasingly physical toppling of a foundation-less structure.

The game's guns have punch, spewing projectiles powerful enough to physically adjust your aim as you fire, but the four classes don't lend themselves well to fair duels. The Commando's minigun shreds enemies at close range, but his RPG feels piddly. The Rocketeer has more fun with his jetpack, but his mobility means foes will often get the drop on you with little warning, leaving your poor corpse unfulfilled. The time taken to kill a player feels far too short, particularly when facing the Marksman and his long-range rifle. Two shots to your blocky head will end your life, the shooter usually far enough away that you can't offer a reprisal – or even spot them, given the uniformly cubist environments.

The fourth class, the Miner, is more fun. He comes with a drill gun that burrows its projectile deep into the rock face it's fired into, creating ready-made paths. *Ace Of Spades'* destruction is as enjoyable as *Minecraft's*, and even adds physics that Mojang's game lacks. But construction feels pointless; barricades and buildings are meaningless when an enemy can jetpack over them or snipe straight through them, and the game moves too fast to allow for complex strategising.

The game's alpha incarnation – before it was picked up by Jagex – was slower, and offered a long war where players constructed secret tunnels and vast, defensible forts. This version of *Ace Of Spades* tries to reach a no man's land between considered construction and chaotic destruction, but its foundations aren't sturdy enough to hold any longterm weight.

**4**

**Publisher** Jagex
**Developer** In-house
**Format** PC
**Release** Out now



**HOME INVASION**
*Ace Of Spades* has five modes, and Demolition is the best. Both teams – green and blue – are charged with destroying their enemy's base. Miners stream toward the opposite structure, intent on doing damage with dynamite and drill guns, while other classes sit at home to defend it. It's as close as *Ace Of Spades* gets to dynamic strategy, and it can engender some tense matches. It's a shame the other modes are so frantic yet flat in comparison.

**BELOW** Early versions of *Ace Of Spades* were free, and games were both slower and longer. The community still exists, playing a beta version of the original (AKA *Ace Of Spades Classic*) on buildandshoot.com



# Zero Escape: Virtue's Last Reward

Few visual novels have played around with the possibilities of an interactive medium quite like cult 2010 DS import *999: Nine Persons, Nine Hours, Nine Doors*, so it's good to see its follow-up take those bold ideas further. *Virtue's Last Reward*'s labyrinthine storyline tugs you down a set of branching pathways that splinter out into a total of 25 endings. Why have one conclusion when you can offer two dozen?

The upshot is a narrative that often leaves you as bewildered as its protagonists – nine wildly disparate personalities trapped in a warehouse as part of a human experiment run by masked sociopath Zero. It's a near-identical setup to its predecessor, yet references to past incidents are introduced in such a way as to reward the dedicated without alienating newcomers.

Dialogue has been smartly translated for the most part, with some delightfully poor rabbit puns from Zero's lapine AI assistant. The game's reliance on exposition is more problematic, with some patronising repetition of its rules. Yet while the story sprinkles in twists and revelations like a pulpy airport thriller, it's not afraid to stir in weightier ideas. Given players can return to forks in the road at any time, resurrecting recently deceased characters in the process, it's no surprise to see a conversation about Schrödinger's Cat. That such lofty themes are discussed by the likes of a preserved Egyptian priestess and a hulking amnesiac in armour only adds to the fun. There may be a lot of dialogue to tap through – the process can be automated – but it's a page-turner with flashes of real intelligence.

Breaking up the chat are room-escape puzzles, smartly pitched so as to not halt the story for too long, but challenging enough that there's genuine satisfaction in solving them. It's a pity the controls are awkward – on Vita at least – with neither touch nor buttons feeling entirely natural. Your ultimate destination, meanwhile, is determined by your choices to betray or ally with your fellow contestants after each room is conquered, an idea that would carry greater emotional weight but for the ease with which you can skip across the paths you've opened to reverse decisions, a rare instance where the game's structure is to its detriment.

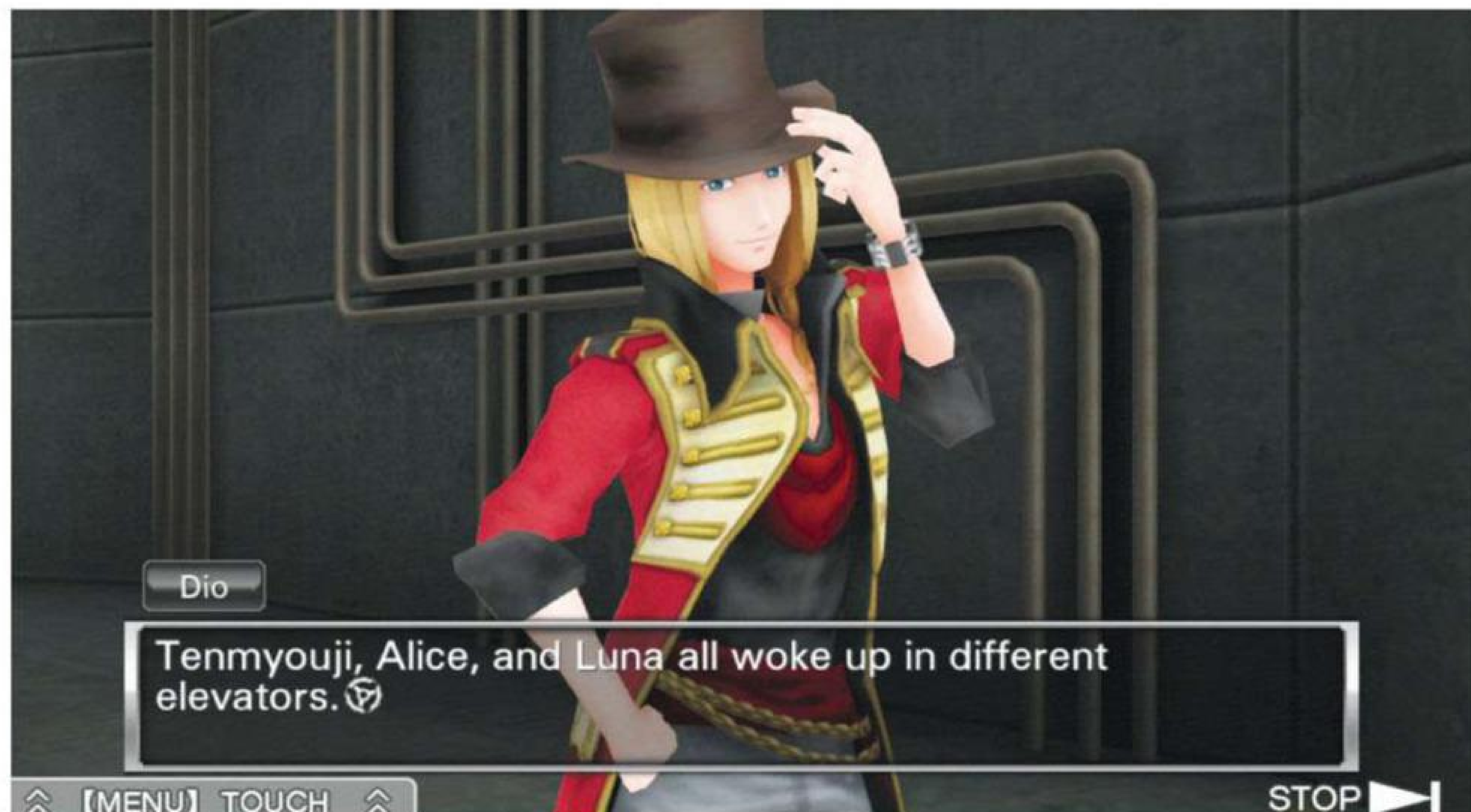
Yet it involves you much more in its storytelling, asking you to expose the impulses of a character in one branch to explain their behaviour in another. It essentially casts you in the role of virtual detective, your job to uncover new secrets to unlock fresh investigative avenues. Where 999 gave you a more passive role, *VLR* makes you a key participant in its twisted tale – and that serves to make its mysteries that much more invigorating to unravel.

**7**

**Publisher** Rising Star Games/Aksys
**Developer** Chunsoft
**Format** 3DS, Vita (version tested)
**Release** Out now



**GUT PUNCH**
*Virtue's Last Reward* lacks a little of its predecessor's shock value. *999*'s thrilling grisly early set-piece created an unsettling atmosphere that the opening scenes here fail to match. Writer Kotaro Uchikoshi does eventually raise the stakes, but the threat of death by lethal injection is a less forceful motivator than wrist-mounted triggers for stomach explosives. Bracelets are back, though, tracking the points that lead to either freedom or death.




**BELOW** **The cast are a colourful bunch, spanning from the young and prodigiously clever Quark here to the mysterious armoured K and the flamboyant and insensitive Dio. But who can you trust not to betray you?**

## Uncharted: Fight For Fortune

**Publisher** SCE
**Developer** In-house (Bend)
**Format** Vita
**Release** Out now

Setting a card game in the *Uncharted* universe makes a strange kind of sense: when he's not gunning down henchmen by the hundred, the lovably homicidal Nathan Drake strikes you as someone who likely uses his ill-gotten gains to pay off poker debts. And Drake would likely appreciate the violence of *Uncharted: Fight For Fortune*, where murder is a win condition.

From a deck comprised of hero, villain and mercenary characters, players take it in turns to place a single card in one of five slots, before handing it a treasure to hold and bolstering it with 'resources' (AKA action cards). How many of the latter you can afford is based on the fortunes you store – attacks from a rival's card played opposite can cost you the loot, but if you hang on you'll earn its full value on the next turn, rather than a lower amount for immediately banking it. Place a card opposite an empty slot, meanwhile, and it'll damage your opponent directly.

Most cards carry a bonus, such as the chance to attack a card in any position, while certain adjacent combinations boost offensive or defensive powers. There's tactical depth, then, but it's squandered on a game that doesn't understand the importance of balance; those with a completed *Golden Abyss* save can boost the value of fortune cards, and there's a distinct advantage to going first. Then again, given Drake's propensity for getting himself into unfair fights, perhaps it was unwise to expect a level playing field.

**5**



## Aero Porter

**Publisher** Level-5
**Developer** Vivarium
**Format** 3DS
**Release** Out now

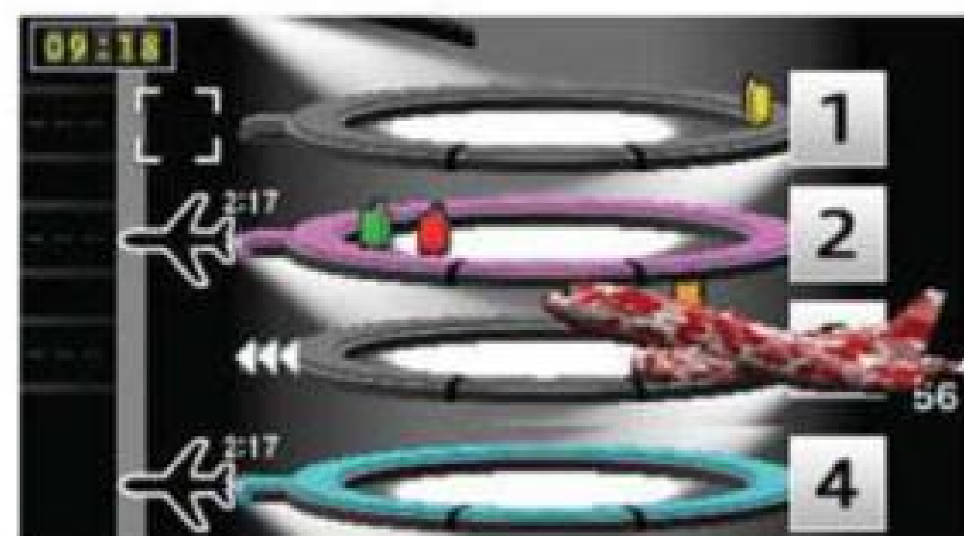
Given that he conceived the Odama, feudal Japan's most unreliable military weapon, it's hardly surprising that Yoot Saito should now have devised the world's least efficient baggage-sorting system. *Aero Porter* sees you raise and lower sections of a tower of conveyor belts to lift or drop colour-coded cases to like-hued carousels. But a squeeze of either shoulder button moves all belts, and when you have five or six to keep an eye on – not to mention a strict time limit to load all baggage onto a flight – coordinating your index fingers is a good deal trickier than it might first appear.

Your first few shifts will likely result in mediocre three-star ratings, then, and just as you're getting to grips with the concept Saito mischievously adds further complexities. Running conveyors depletes a finite energy resource, which can be topped up by guiding a fuel tank to a repository at the bottom.

Alternatively, you can opt to briefly power down unused carousels, or decrease the belt speed – though this reduces the economy of your sorting, losing you precious combo opportunities. Meanwhile, VIPs demand their luggage be loaded separately from regular cargo, while politicians with security concerns use their baggage tag rather than the case to determine their destination.

It's a surprisingly tense juggling act, and while some will lack the patience to climb its steep learning curve, the stress is worth it for the soaring sense of accomplishment you'll feel at the end of a hard day's work.

**7**




## QatQi

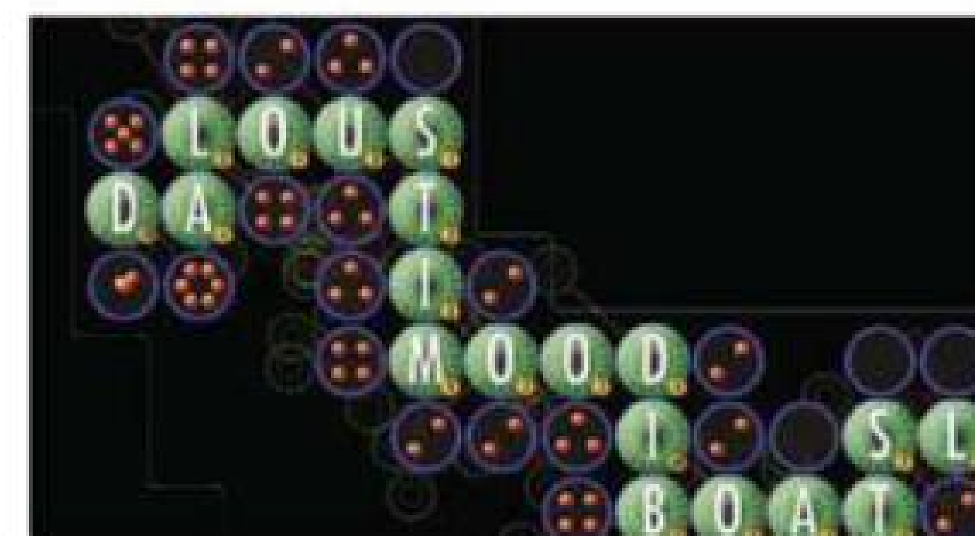
**Publisher** ZWorkbench
**Developer** In-house
**Format** iOS
**Release** Out now

At first, iOS word game *QatQi* feels like solo Scrabble played in the dark. You begin by placing a letter from your tray of six on a lone pulsing circle, which then illuminates four more. The more letters you place, the more tiles light up, and the more options become available to you. The game ends when there are no more tiles to replenish your tray.

It's a simple conceit, but there's much more to *QatQi*. You'll earn more points for building up larger words with smaller ones (so: TA, TAR, STAR) while certain tiles act as multipliers, with others hiding coins that offer a 50-point reward when used. The object is to explore the board, finding routes that reveal the most tile bonuses to maximise your scoring potential. To which end, there's an undo feature that can be used until the generous free supply runs out, extra uses being fairly reasonably monetised.

It's designed to be played daily, with puzzles increasing in difficulty as the week progresses. By Thursday, you're venturing into multiple rooms on more expansive boards, and you're struck by a sudden revelation. You're leaving a breadcrumb trail of letters to map a darkened dungeon, your own poor letter placement is the enemy within, and the undo feature your way of retreating and returning forearmed with the knowledge of loot placement and traps – those walls that block that killer seven-letter blow you'd been waiting to unleash. Yes, *QatQi* is a Roguelike with words, and by the time it dawns, this ferociously smart game will have you hooked.

**8**



# create

## Lifting the lid on the art, science and business of making games

This issue's People, Places, Things fires into action on p118 when we meet Mohammad Alavi, the rebellious level designer responsible for some of *Call Of Duty*'s most memorable and controversial moments. Places braves the jagged mountains of *Skyrim*'s Reach on p120, as we learn how the least homogenous and lush part of Bethesda's world helps to enrich it. Then we plug into the Animus on p122, revisiting the history of the central tool in the *Assassin's Creed* series with fresh eyes. Studio Profile on p124 sees Bungie break its silence and provide some new details about building the post-*Halo* sci-fi world of *Destiny*, as well as how it feels to see its series in the hands of another. The Making Of... on p128 takes us to contemporary Hong Kong as we learn how *Sleeping Dogs* survived cancellation to come back even stronger. The Art Of... on p132 takes a chainsaw to your senses and delivers the Unreal sights of *Gears Of War 3*, the concluding chapter of Epic's violent opus. As ever, it's down to our columnists to provide the closing remarks, with designer Tadhg Kelly (p136) keen to snap TV broadcasters out of their twee and limited world views when it comes to gaming, while Valve's Clint Hocking (p138) talks about what it really means to abdicate authorship to the player. Randy Smith (p140) employs his dark vision as one of the creators of *Thief* to explain why possessing *Dishonored*'s Corvo is so satisfying, and writer James Leach (p142) opens a discussion about the nature of dialogue in Japanese and western videogames.



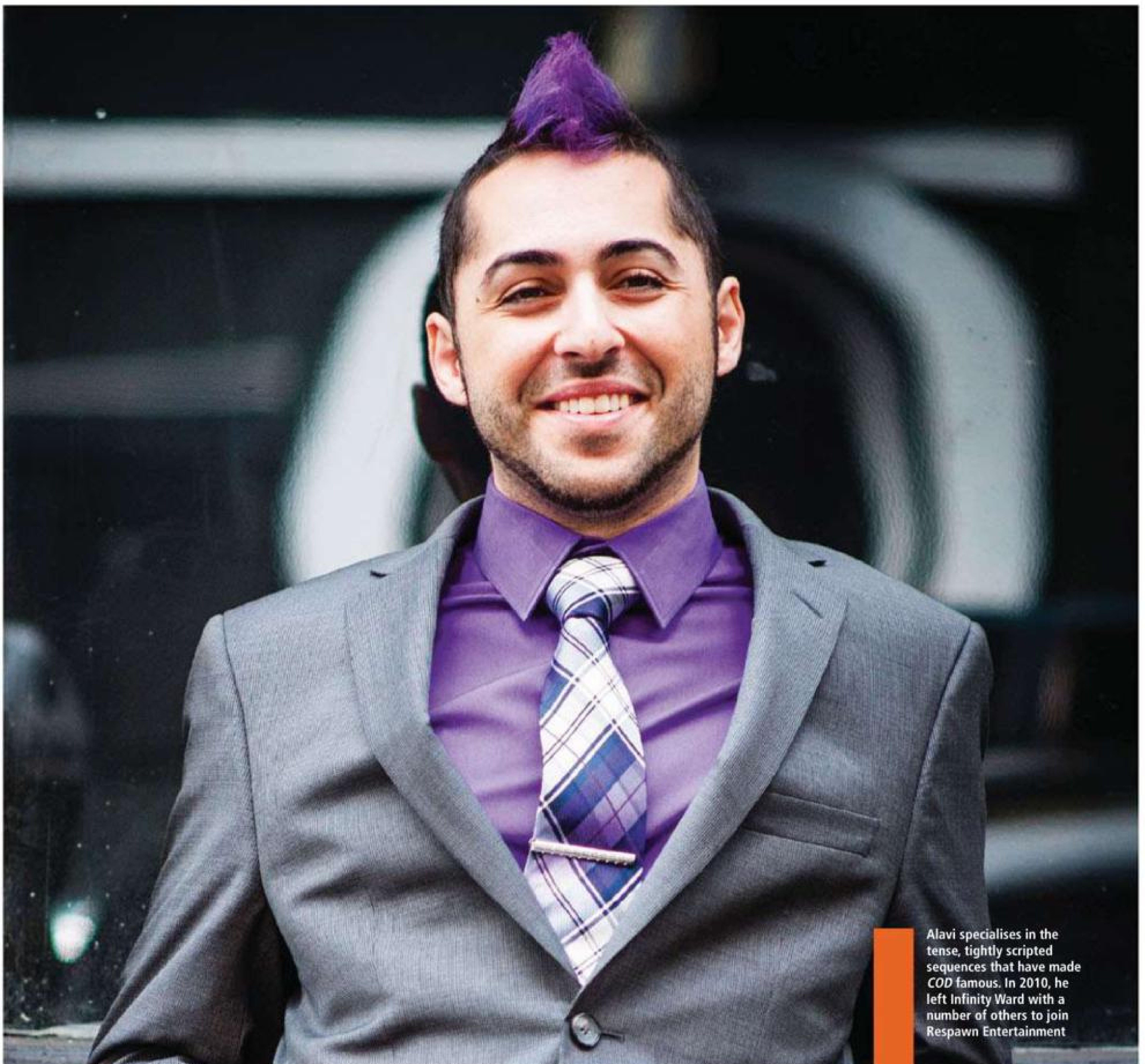
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Bungie breaks its silence on p124, talking about its history with Apple and Microsoft, and its post-*Halo* sci-fi epic, *Destiny*

# People

## MOHAMMAD ALAVI

How an aspiring doctor became the designer of No Russian



Alavi specialises in the tense, tightly scripted sequences that have made *COD* famous. In 2010, he left Infinity Ward with a number of others to join Respawn Entertainment

**M**ohammad Alavi is responsible for some of the most intense and memorable campaign levels in *Call Of Duty* history, but he almost never entered the industry at all. He was on the path to becoming a doctor, earning bachelor's degrees in chemistry and biology. On the side, he enjoyed making maps for firstperson shooters, starting with *Duke Nukem 3D* and continuing with *Quake*, *Half-Life* and *Counter-Strike*. As a part of the Internet's then-thriving modding scene, he soon became a contributor to some of the more prominent mods of the *Half-Life* era, including the original *Natural Selection* and the ill-fated *Half-Life: Nightwatch*. But the idea of working on games professionally never struck him as viable.

Then, just as he had sent his last applications to medical school, an issue of PC Gamer magazine changed his life. The issue contained a feature on modders and mod teams, and prominently featured were screenshots of Alavi's maps. "I'm flipping through this magazine, and all of a sudden I see all my levels," he recalls. "I never took it as a serious career path; I didn't think I was good enough. Once I saw that, though, I guess it gave me confidence."

On the next page, Alavi saw an advertisement for Florida's Full Sail University. "I got my acceptance to medical school, but I lied to my parents – I told them I didn't get in. I was like, 'Well, I didn't get into medical school, so here's a backup plan!'" he laughs. "They were pretty pissed for a while there."

After graduating from Full Sail with a degree in game design, Alavi moved to Los Angeles in the hopes of finding employment. He ended up getting hired by Infinity Ward just after the studio had completed *Call Of Duty*. "It was the combination of the programming I'd learned in school and all the stuff I'd done on those *Half-Life* mods that got me the job," he explains.

Alavi's first professional levels were for *Call Of Duty 2*. Among other things, he created the darkly humorous potato-throwing grenade tutorial. But he really started to push the boundaries on his studio's next game, *Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*.

The first level of that title, Crew Expendable, is set on a cargo ship listing in a stormy sea. Alavi proposed a complex sequence for the end of the mission that had the player racing to escape from the ship as it broke apart and sank. "All my leads were like, 'No, there's no way you're going to have time to do that, especially not with our engine. We'll find the nuke in the container and fade to black,'" Alavi says.

Such concerns were understandable: the design called for players to rush through the tilting ship's cramped corridors along with multiple friendlies – easily a case where you could get caught behind one of the NPCs or run right past them. Controlling the situation so that players felt in danger without overly complicating the escape attempt (the dramatic effect would be ruined if it had to be repeated over and over) required level scripting at the most detailed, granular level – not something the studio's bosses felt they could afford to spend time on with their tight schedule.

"I knew I couldn't argue with them, so I just said OK and thankfully they trusted me enough to leave me alone for a couple of weeks at a time, which is not smart. I stayed after hours and worked 18-hour days for three weeks putting together the ending they told me not to do… Two or three weeks later, there was a leads meeting and one of the effects guys came in and said 'There's a rumour [Alavi] is making the ship sink,' and Jason [West] was like, 'What!?' They came into my office, stood behind me and said, 'What are you working on? Show us right now.' It wasn't quite done, but I had the major beats in. Once they saw it, it convinced them, and we shipped it that way. But it was a secret for a while there."

"I got my acceptance to medical school, but I lied to my parents – told them I didn't get in"

Alavi deployed his talents – both at scripting and dissembling what he was really working on – once more for All Ghillied Up, another level from *Modern Warfare* that debuted at E3 2007. In this tense and deliberately paced mission, the player accompanies a more experienced officer as the pair attempt to stealthily infiltrate enemy territory.

"We'd just come from doing World War II games, so we were still switching out our AI to handle differently. That level needed a sense of stealth, obviously, but the AI didn't support that yet. They were either on or off – as soon as they saw you, they started firing. I was trying to work within those bounds, but I'd walk up to this magic trigger and all of a sudden they'd turn on and start firing. I tried changing everything I could to make it feel right, but it never did."

Once more, Alavi charged into the wilderness alone, eventually writing over 10,000 lines of scripts that anticipated every way the player might disturb or be noticed by the patrolling soldiers, handling each case with different animations and behaviours. "It was crazy and jury-rigged together, but the end result is that you can enter the situation from any angle and it's legit – if they thought they saw you from a certain distance, they'd behave differently than if you popped up right in front of their face."

**He also got** into a little bit of trouble. "It was the same thing – all my leads suddenly heard that I was writing AI," he laughs. "And I'm not a programmer, so it was dirty and sloppy. But they played it over and over, and it was like, 'All right, you did it. Now finish up the rest of the level.'"

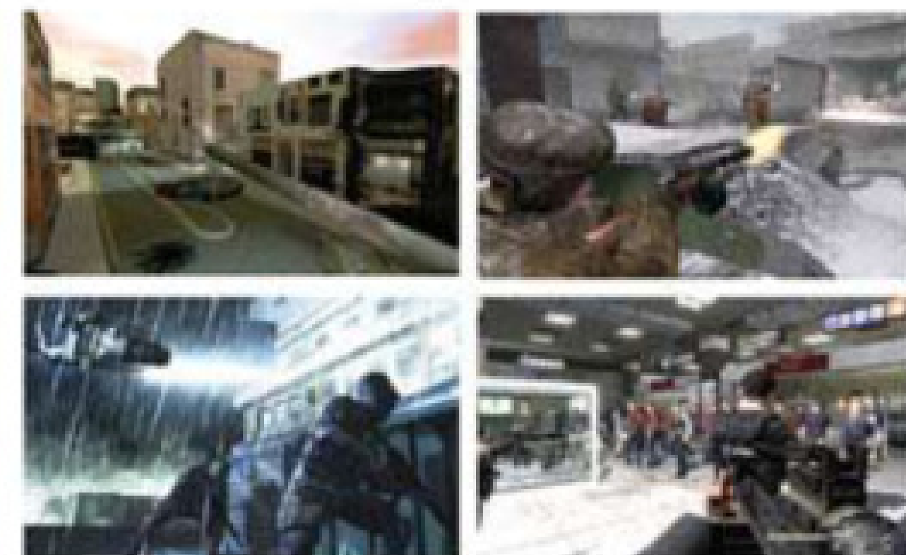
Alavi's script ended up having value beyond that particular sequence. It formed the template for the creation of the AI for the next game, *Modern Warfare 2*: "Our AI programmer basically took my script, broke it up, and rewrote it in a way that was robust and optimised – but it was basically what I'd told the AI to do in the first place."

*Modern Warfare 2*, of course, gave Alavi more chances to do battle with the limitations of the technology and the medium itself. In addition to the sprawling and complex Second Sun, which even has a segment in space, he also designed and scripted the controversial No Russian sequence, in which the player is permitted to participate in a civilian massacre – something that he has said was in part an attempt to make people consider their actions in a videogame before mindlessly pulling the trigger. It became one of the most hotly debated topics of 2009.

In 2010, *Call Of Duty* publisher Activision sued Infinity Ward co-founders Jason West and Vince Zampella, and vice versa. Alavi left with a group of Infinity Ward employees to join West and Zampella at their newly formed studio, Respawn Entertainment, where today he works on a new project. He can't disclose anything about it yet, but that's OK – we wonder if even his bosses know what he's up to right now. ■

# CV

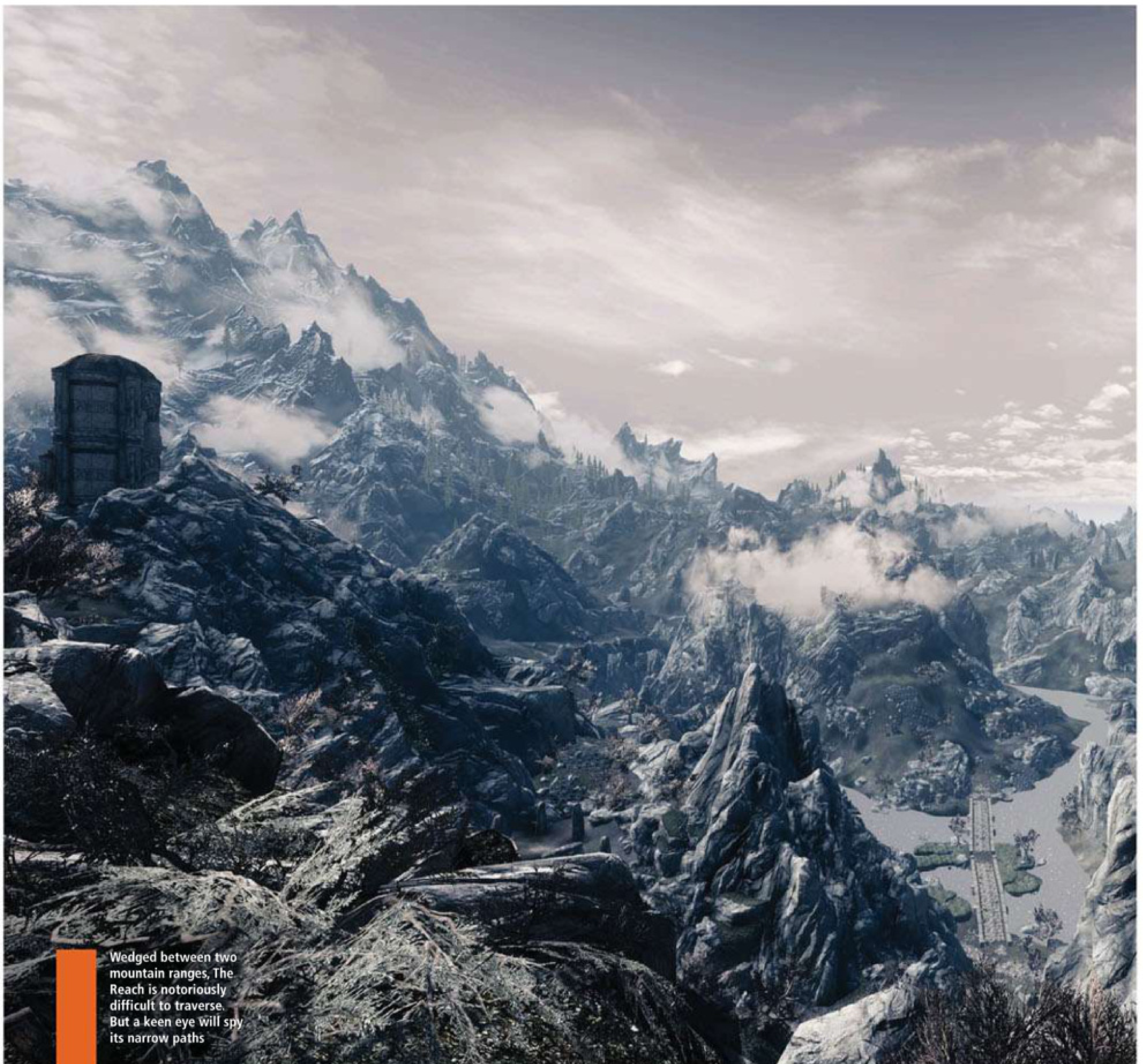
**URL** www.respawn.com
**Selected Softography** *Uncrossable Parallel* mod, *Call Of Duty 2*, *Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*



# Places

## THE REACH

Why Skyrim's most barren environment makes for a bountiful world



Wedged between two mountain ranges, The Reach is notoriously difficult to traverse. But a keen eye will spy its narrow paths

**From** *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*
**Developer** Bethesda Game Studios
**Origin** US
**First release** 2011

Like most nations in the real world, Skyrim is anything but homogenous. It has no one definitive landscape or city. It's a sum of disparate parts stitched together into a rich geographical tapestry. While the concept of variety in most open-world games translates into a series of playgrounds – jungle area, ice area, desert area and so on – Bethesda has proven itself a master of nuanced worldbuilding. In *Skyrim*, as with previous *Elder Scrolls* titles, the developer has paid as much attention to how the parts fit together as to the parts themselves.

No region exemplifies this tendency more than The Reach, a hold to the west. Wedged between two mountain ranges, frequently shrouded by claustrophobic fog, strangled by spindly plants and occupied by a resentful indigenous race, The Reach is arguably the most distinct locale in Skyrim. Yet it is also a microcosm of Skyrim's identity as a nation – held together by the very tensions that threaten to destroy it.

First impressions matter, and there are many first paths a new player can take into *Skyrim's* expansive world. But few will find themselves venturing to The Reach before they experience Skyrim's other regions. The nation's contours bend the player away from its murky paths. None of its landmarks stand out on a distant horizon, hidden as they are behind the mountains.

Only two paths cleave between the mountains to connect The Reach with the rest of Skyrim. Each leaves the main highway between the cities of Whiterun and Solitude to spiral up and around mountain passes, and then drops the player into The Reach's north or south. These paths are easily overlooked; they don't go anywhere else. Skyrim's helpful street signs, indicating cities across the country, point off in all other directions at these intersections, with only the one lonely arrow directing you into The Reach. The Reach is a dead end. You will not stumble upon The Reach while trying to go somewhere else.

The Reach possesses its own geography, its own politics, and its own cultures. Walking down either path, the shift from the rest of the Skyrim into The Reach is stark. The brownish grass gives way to solid stone. The green trees and flowers make way for the skeletal grey juniper trees, their roots clinging to the rock with eerie desperation. As the paths descend down from the grasslands into The Reach proper, a thick fog typically descends on all but the most fair-weather days.


**The spindly juniper trees you find scattered throughout The Reach are as grey and uninviting as the rocky landscape itself**

There is a suffocating dankness to The Reach that extends from the sky overhead down to the earth underfoot. The river that carves a path through the region is a murkier colour than the waterways elsewhere in the country, as though the fog has polluted the water itself.

But it is the stone that rises up on either side of the path that most vividly distinguishes The Reach from the rest of Skyrim. These aren't the sweeping mountains of the rest of the country. These are abrupt, jagged walls that fence you in and push you into the region's serpentine belly. As you follow the region's few paths, the open blue sky and its distant vistas are consumed by the towering rock, reduced to a dark grey slither far above you.

These aren't the sweeping mountains of the rest of the country. These are abrupt, jagged walls

Everything feels alien in The Reach, not least of all the indigenous Forsworn people. Their camps are easily distinguishable from any other race. Various animal heads and body parts decorate their tents. Native monsters that would cheerfully maul any other stand by their side, as if to tell you that the Forsworn are a natural part of this place. Indeed, the Forsworn claim The Reach as their homeland. While the Nords fancy themselves oppressed throughout Skyrim, subjugated by an expansionist Empire, here they are most certainly the oppressors.

The Reach's Nords live in the city of Markarth, which almost cowers beneath the foothills of the area's tallest mountains. Unsurprisingly, Markarth is unlike any other city in Skyrim. Built within the ruins of an ancient Dwemer city, Markarth boasts houses carved into the stone itself, one atop the other. The Jarl's palace is a towering Dwemer hall, too big for the Nords' torches to light effectively. The city feels like a younger brother in hand-me-down clothes. Everything is slightly too large, reappropriated and not quite right.

**The Reach exemplifies** the complicated politics that pervade all of Skyrim. While the Nords and the Empire both call the nation theirs, the Forsworn make for a sticky complication. Markarth's bones, meanwhile, are a constant reminder that the Dwemer and the Snow Elves staked claim to the land long before any human race. By complicating our concept of just what Skyrim 'is', The Reach reminds us that for every group's supposedly straightforward right to own the land, the reality is far more complex.

Ultimately, without its variety of peoples, Skyrim would lack its rich identity. Nations aren't purely singular entities so much as amalgamations of contesting identities held in constant tension. It is the relations between the parts that construct a nation's identity, not the parts themselves.

In this way, The Reach makes *Skyrim* feel more complete, more convincing. Pushed to the edge of the game's world, The Reach stands out most for how it is unlike the rest of the nation. But instead of jarring, its different cultures and geography contribute something vital to making *Skyrim's* virtual world truly feel like a living nation – a mottled patchwork that forms a beautiful, improbable whole. ■

# Things

## THE ANIMUS

Why the genetic memory projector of Assassin's Creed is more than a plot device



The Animus's abilities are based on the technology of the First Civilisation, the Greco-Roman aliens who steered humanity in prehistory. We're not sure if that helps or hinders suspension of disbelief

**From** *Assassin's Creed* series
**Developer** Ubisoft
**Origin** Canada
**Debut** 2007

The Animus is a device that renders genetic memories in three dimensions, which situates it firmly in the realm of total nonsense. The problem isn't the device – its mechanisms and workings are obfuscated. No, it's the premise. Genetic memory is a concept that some scientists support, but it refers to humanity-wide inherited responses to certain stimuli. There's no evidence that something as specific as what your ancestors were doing during the Battle of Bunker Hill is coded into your DNA. This isn't science-fiction, then, it's full-blown science-fantasy.

Still, what the Animus does isn't as important to *Assassin's Creed* as what it allows the series to do. Ubisoft's games, insistent as they are on wrapping a present-day frame narrative around their adventures, needed a link between now and the past. A time machine would be problematic, raising insoluble questions and risking paradoxes, so the Animus is the perfect solution. It lets the present-day cast have intimate knowledge of the past but no way to influence it. It can even threaten game-ending desynchronisation should you try to, say, assassinate the wrong people to alter the outcome of the Third Crusade.

This is the Animus's other handy function: it allows the impositions of the series' videogame nature to hide in plain sight, cheekily staring the player in the face even as it contextually excuses them. The real reason you can't pick your own assassination targets is that Ubisoft hasn't built an epic, branching narrative. You can't massacre civilians on the streets either, because it doesn't fit the story. Attempt to do so and the Animus will threaten to cut you off. The hero of *Prince Of Persia*'s 2003 incarnation chided players when he died as part of a plot device that saw him relate his own story. The Animus goes further and forbids you from going off script.

But while the Prince was merely storytelling, the Animus is simulating. It's a computer program and makes no attempt to hide the fact. This is the irony of *Assassin's Creed*: Ubisoft realises its historical settings with unrivalled attention to detail, and then constantly reminds you that they're fakes. There's that UI for a start, superimposing flickering wireframe glyphs upon interactive objects. More subtly, there's the way the series never seeks to find narrative excuses for its limits. It's practically traditional in *Grand Theft Auto*, for instance, that some sort of natural disaster or terrorist warning will shut off access to the full city in the early stages of a game. *Assassin's Creed* doesn't need to find organic reasons to prevent the player wandering off. Its walls aren't even invisible – they're crackling fissures that demonstrate the simulation's opposition to your independent action.



**Desmond has gained the freedom to leave the Animus at will. In *AC: Brotherhood* you could then see the sights of Monteriggioni**

There's an upside to this, though, and it's that *Assassin's Creed* is supremely comfortable in its nature as a game. The Matrix might have beaten Ubisoft to dropping its hero into a pure white space, but that doesn't change the elegance of the fact that *Assassin's Creed's* loading screens are just that. Its menus are the same. Similarly, when Desmond is reminded of the basics at the start of each instalment, he scales abstract, textureless geometry. Few games are so barefaced in showing you the building blocks from which their worlds are made, and even fewer have a means to do so.

> Ubisoft realises its historical settings with unrivalled attention to detail, and then reminds you they're fakes

For all the meta potential of the setup, however, *Assassin's Creed* has always stopped short of something as obvious as putting a controller in Desmond's hands. Indeed, as the series has progressed, it's blurred the distinction between its simulated world and its 'real' one. The first game let you potter around Desmond's laboratory prison at predetermined points. The controls were sluggish, interactivity was limited, and the tasks were dull. It was as boring, in other words, as doing chores having just switched off a videogame. Later entries relied upon the so-called 'Bleeding Effect', an elegant means of transferring Animus gameplay into the real world, but one that has come at the expense of the contrast between the present day and virtual space.

**One area where** *Assassin's Creed* has truly embraced the Animus's role as a surrogate game console is the multiplayer, where Templar trainees engage in deathmatches in order to hone their skills. The great gimmick of the mode has always been that to blend into environments you must behave in the slightly stilted, prescriptive nature of an NPC. Matches often devolve into rooftop chases, of course, but as a concept it is massively daring. Most games want you to invest in their simulated worlds, but Ubisoft asks you to embrace the Animus's artificiality and replicate it.

And there are hints this attitude is bleeding back into the main game. Complete *ACIII* and your after-credits task is a collect-a-thon that lets Connor unlock 'Animus hacks'. These exploits turn you invincible or invisible, let you switch season from summer to winter, or change day to night. They're cheats. But, intriguingly, they're cheats integrated into the fiction of the game. They might be endgame toys, but there's no reason why future games couldn't let players tear at the fabric of this self-consciously virtual world in more subtle ways.

With Desmond's story finally concluded, Ubisoft is no doubt plotting the future of its franchise. Does *Assassin's Creed* need a frame narrative at all? Do its doggedly researched worlds have to be self-consciously fake? Is it time to retire the Animus, or to make better use of its unique, explicitly simulated space? ■

STUDIO PROFILE

# Bungie

After a lengthy silence, the post-Halo Bungie surfaces with its Destiny soon to be revealed



*Destiny* is Bungie's new sci-fi series, based some 700 years into Earth's future. The intention, like *Halo* before it, is for it to be a long-running saga

# BUNGiE

**Founded** 1991
**Employees** 350
**Key staff** Jason Jones (co-founder), Harold Ryan (president), Pete Parsons (COO), Joseph Staten (writer/design director)
**URL** www.bungie.net
**Selected softography** *Gnop!, Marathon, Myth, Halo: Combat Evolved*
**Current projects** *Destiny*

Most successful companies have a tipping point, a moment in which the philosophy shifts from geeks in a garage to potential world power. For Bungie, that moment came at the New York Macworld expo in 1999.

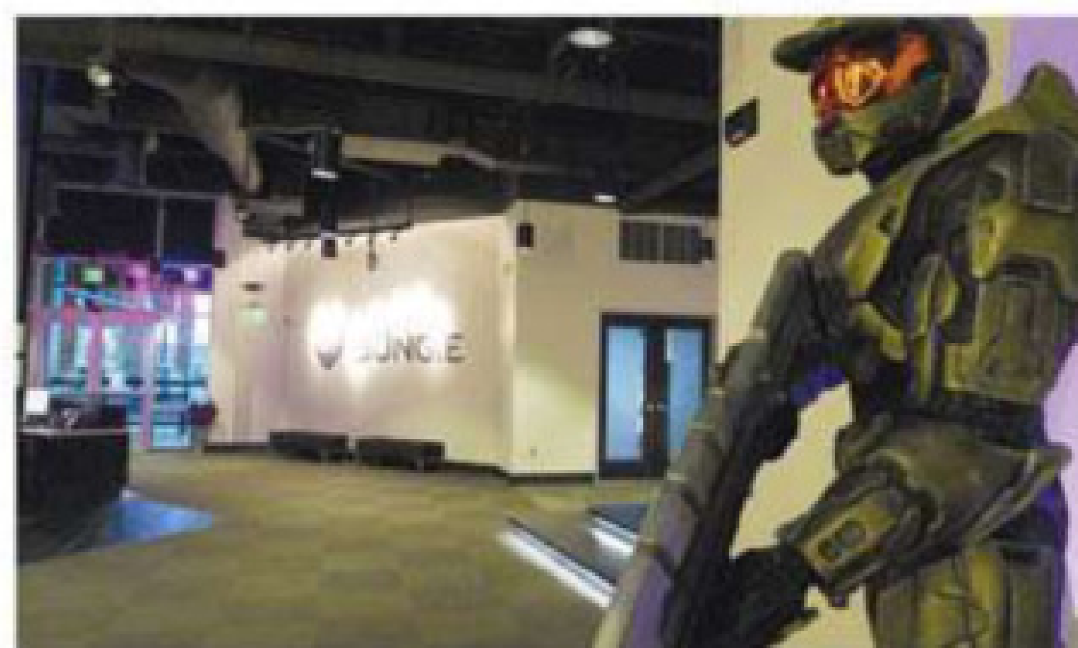
Of course, the then-Chicago-based studio had already been beavering away on acclaimed titles for years. The likes of *Pathways Into Darkness*, *Marathon* and *Myth* brought the developer a growing fanbase, and very quickly founders Jason Jones and Alex Seropian had 20 staff to fit into the vermin-infested ex-Catholic mission that housed its first office.

But then Steve Jobs chose to turn a prototype of *Halo* into a poster boy for the new generation of Macs by showing it off on stage. "At that point, Bungie was sort of a boutique favourite company for the Mac gamers," recalls the studio's long-time music director, **Marty O'Donnell**. "But when Steve Jobs decided he would highlight *Halo*… it just sort of changed on a dime the public perception of Bungie. Everybody was watching the Macworld webcast – which was kind of new in 1999, it was a very small postage stamp window on your screen – and Steve Jobs did his thing. Seeing the visuals come on and just waiting for the crowd's response… that was an incredible time."

What it did, of course, was rouse the attention of Microsoft, then looking for a killer app to front its move into the console space. In 2000, it bought Bungie and the *Halo* brand, and that small bunch of kids in Chicago became a cog in the Xbox machine.

Some 13 years, 50 million *Halo* sales and the signing of a ten-year contract with Activision later, Bungie is now starting to emerge from a two-year lockdown. This reentry into the spotlight has been a little premature, coming after a leak of art assets for its new project, *Destiny*, which had been provided to an ad agency. "I was in a conference room," recalls writer and design director **Joseph Staten**. "And **Pete** [**Parsons**, COO] walked in with his laptop. Pete has this look on him when he's a little nervous and his eyes get really wide; his entire body was quivering."

After the initial shock of the discovery, however, the studio did what it usually does and coped. "I think our response was typical Bungie," says Staten. "We just took it in our stride and, instead of making it a negative, we turned it into a positive. We initiated a conversation with our



Bungie's last address was an old hardware store, but its converted cinema home offers even more open-plan space

fans, which we hadn't had in a really long time. And I think having done that, the great reaction that we got from it really made us all very excited internally. It motivated us."

Bungie's now based in a gigantic office space in Bellevue, a suburb of Seattle, converted from an old multiplex cinema. There are effectively two floors, the lower section housing servers and infrastructure as well as the test team, a screening room and performance capture studio. Upstairs is the office space, once ten cinema screens, but now a totally open area that's the size of a football field. Over this is a mezzanine that used to be a row of projection booths, but is now a cluster of meeting rooms that look out on the vast workspace below.

> "With Halo 2, the weight of the world was on our shoulders and we didn't do as good a job"

"The building is an important thing," says Parsons. He recalls the company's first office on Microsoft's Redmond campus, which the official history on its website insists was wedged between a quarry and a swamp. "Time magazine described it as a 'low-rent nerd farm in the middle of a pumpkin patch'," he laughs. "But *this* is a great place to make games. You walk in and you're ready to go to work, your equipment's ready and you can see the team around you…"

**The Bungie culture** is fairly well known. There are no closed offices, no separation of rank and file, and even the most junior staff members get creative input. "One of the neat things we do is give every new person a studio tour, and we follow up with them every few weeks after they've joined," says Parsons. "We want to do that so that they can give us the most critical feedback before they become all jaded and bitter and cynical. And you know, one of the things they often talk about is that they feel like they have a voice; they feel like from the day they got here, their opinions mattered; they felt like they were contributing – they're shocked to find out that even the most senior people care about what they have to say."

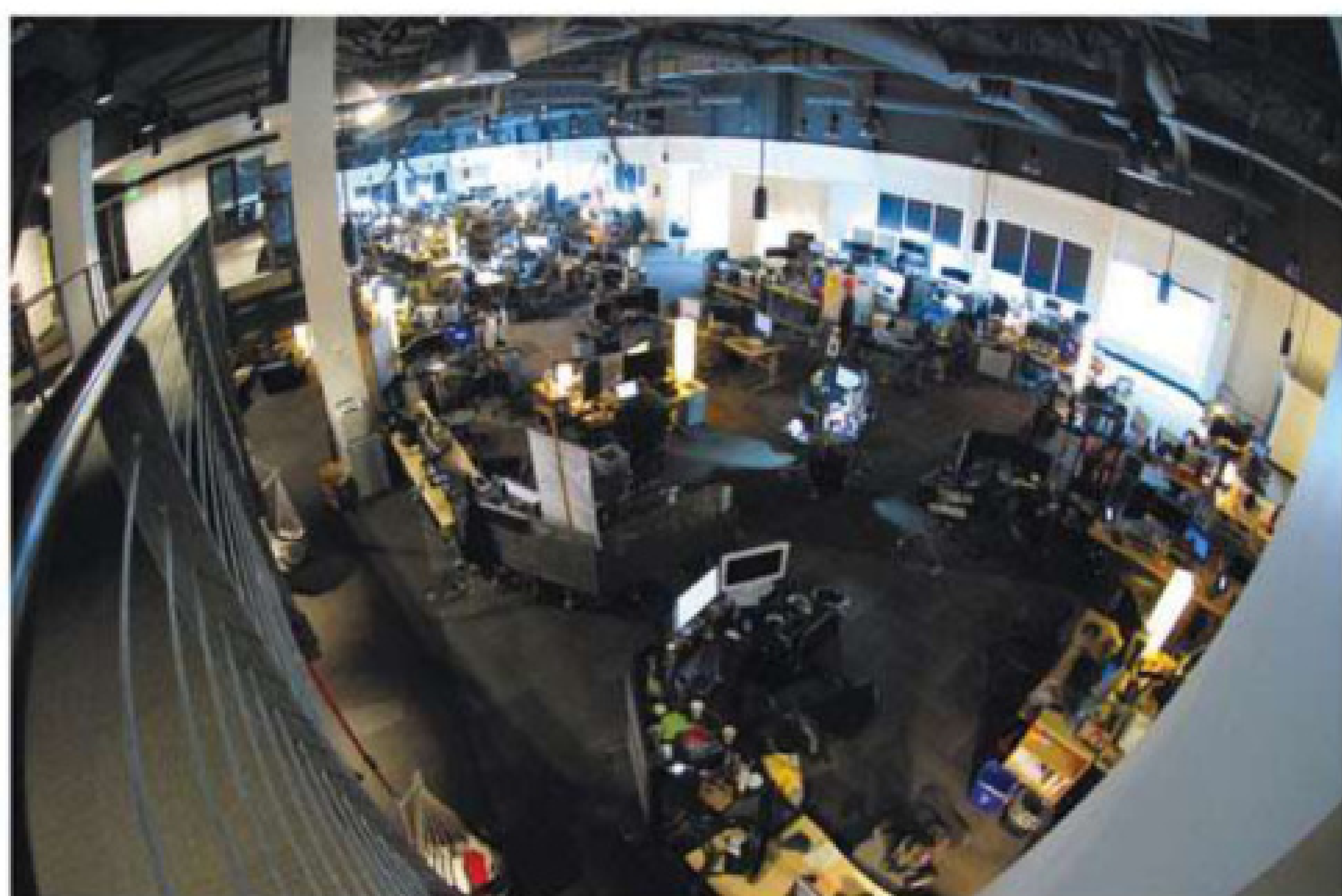
Of course, most big development studios aim to foster egalitarian working environments, but here it seems to be fundamental. It's not an airy target, but a given. And this goes back to something specific, something challenging.

"I think a key moment in the studio's history was really the bitter end of *Halo 2*," explains Staten. "We tasted the heights of success, but also the bitterness of overreach – [there was a] lack of planning and maybe a lack of focus on our part. In terms of moments that made us mature as a studio, that was the big one. We came out of that by the skin of our teeth, with a lot of scars.

"But we also learned some really important lessons about what it takes to bring home really big games with a lot of expectations [riding on them]. I mean, no one had any expectations for *Halo*, but with *Halo 2* the weight of the world was on our shoulders, and we didn't do as good a job as we could have. That experience has enabled us to do the games we did in the *Halo* universe after that, and certainly we wouldn't be able to tackle what we're working on now if we hadn't had that experience."

There were two realisations: the studio needed to find a more systematic way of working, and to create an environment in which the support structures were visible. "The thing that pulled us through *Halo 2* was you could look around the room and see the people who you were supporting and who were going to support you," says Bungie president **Harold Ryan**. "That became a really important aspect of how we set our teams up and how we manage them. We proved to each other with *Halo 2* that a bunch of us would stick together through thick and thin. You could see that it was a group of people that were there to work for each other."

There is also a sense of fluidity, and Bungie has embraced that. "All the desks are on wheels, which is a decision we made back in 2005,"





**Bungie's staff (left) is modular, with desks on wheels and no closed offices. This allows people to be shuffled around quickly, and maintains the egalitarian vibe of the studio. The *Halo* series (above) taught the team lots of hard lessons, the experience of which should improve *Destiny***

says Parsons. "It's great for allowing us the freedom to change the team up as we need. I'll give you an example: two months ago, we moved about 212 desks on our main floor – we were able to shut down on Friday night at 8pm and open up on Monday morning at 8am after having moved all of those. We need the flexibility to be able to move the team at will. I think that it really is part of the functioning machine that is Bungie."

When we last visited Bungie three years ago, the studio was a heightened example of healthy industry working practices. The environment felt irreverent but passionate, and there was a sense that everyone mattered. Since then, this culture has evolved into something almost spiritual. While most studios start to resemble street gangs, Bungie has become something more tribal. "I've known Jason and watched Bungie grow since '96," says O'Donnell. "And yes, it is a bit like a tribe – you have oral traditions, you have rituals and it's really important that the tribal elders continue to pass those on to the new kids that come along."

Of course, most Bungie watchers know about its running jokes and traditions, its in-house gaming competitions, and its willingness to open up to fans. But, fascinatingly, this isn't just about culture – it's also about how the studio functions. "On the more technical side, what I find really interesting is the Bungie process of making games, the way we work together," continues O'Donnell. "There's a tribal knowledge that only gets passed down because people who have been there a while remember not only the pain of what we go through, but that this is the way we do things."

The tribe has had to adapt recently, of course. Six years ago, Bungie bought itself back from Microsoft then entered into its current publishing contract with Activision for *Destiny*. It's a first foray into modern multiplatform development, and Bungie hasn't taken that lightly. "We put quite a bit of time into planning the architecture of our engine, how we were going to build our content and how we were going to structure our teams long before we even signed the deal with Activision," says Ryan. "The transition was one that we planned hard for from 2007; it's been a long time since Bungie shipped on more than one platform, so we've been collecting people who have more experience [in that area] and we still continue to do that as we get ready to launch."

*Destiny*, like *Halo*, is an epic tale pitching mankind against an alien aggressor. Placing the action 700 years into Earth's future, the leaked blurb promises a universe as deep as that of Star Wars. It's another longterm project, then, which has totally shaped its development."Pre-production was really important," Staten says. "We weren't just planning to do one game, we were building a whole universe where we could tell any story we wanted for ten years. We knew that if we wanted to make a fertile place for us to play, we couldn't rush it. We're known for pre-production, but we took even more time this time around.

> "The world we're making is more robust than even Halo, because we took the time to do it right"

"And that pre-production work continued well into production, as we made discoveries about what worked and what didn't work. And you really don't know the kind of world you want to make until the rubber hits the road and you start creating beautiful art and walking around in [it]... The benefits have been huge; the world that we're making is so much more robust than even *Halo*, and that's because we took the time to do it right."

**The company has** designed its development tools to streamline the multiplatform process and to be adaptable, building towards the future of the *Destiny* series. Plus, having a stable workforce (half of the original *Halo* team still works there) has meant Bungie isn't continually training lots of new employees. "There was a very conscious decision when we went independent from Microsoft," says O'Donnell. "We wanted to make a game company that didn't get into the habit of swelling its ranks in order to finish a project, and then letting a bunch of people go. We wanted to figure out a way to make a place where people could come and work and stay."

Avoiding the binge, crunch and purge cycle has meant lots of forward planning. While *Halo 2* had a couple of producers and a long crunch, there are between ten and 15 producers working on planning issues with *Destiny*. The studio is also structuring its staff rotas for the title's post-release lifespan. "One of the things that we planned for with the next game universe is DLC and subsequent releases," explains Ryan. "We're very carefully scaling the ambition and the size of the team to one where we can reliably keep people working on meaningful tasks and also balance time for them to take vacation."

So are there other aspects to keeping the Bungie tribe intact? Parsons is quick to respond. "You provide them with the right comforts and benefits and an environment that's great for making games. And that doesn't just include the individuals that are working there, it includes reaching out to their significant others, making sure that they understand what people are doing and that we care about them and their families."

Ryan also points out that all employees are shareholders, and because Bungie owns the *Destiny* IP, everyone stands to gain directly from its success. "We pay well, comparatively to our competition. But I think we retain people who are the best in class because they own a piece of the company. If this game succeeds, they can take pride in ownership; it's their thing."

But above all the talk of meritocracies, benefits and families is the looming weight of global expectation – the staff here will have to meet it, and, as ever, it is not going to be easy.

"We've said before that at Bungie we set the bar so high that the fall would kill you," says Parsons. "The only way is to have people around you who you trust... You asked how have we been able to keep that as we've grown larger? It is a question we get all the time. A big part of it is we've never lowered our bar, ever." ■

# Q&A



**Joseph Staten**
Writer/design director, Bungie

**How has making *Destiny* as an independent studio been different to working on *Halo* as part of Microsoft?**
With this game, if it succeeds, I know exactly what I'm going to be doing for the next eight years. And that's different from the way it was before at Microsoft. You need a long view of what the process is going to be. You can take ideas and move them years down the road – you can begin to structure the way you want to build not just this one game, but the way you want to tell the story for many years. That's hugely important for creative people: not just to understand the value of the work they're doing right now, but the value of the work over time.

**How does this affect the team as a whole?**
From a team structure point of view, what that means for people at Bungie is if you're a more junior person who has desires to become a leader on the team or do grander creative things, you can look ahead in time and imagine what you could be doing three years from now. You can imagine leading up a small team for a future release – there are definitely paths for people now that there weren't before. I think that's really important to us as a company. Frankly, it's going to be super-hard to shift the first version of this game. I have no idea how we're going to keep doing it for the next eight years [at] the cadence that we're going to have to, but I would say that it's also hugely exciting. And if you're ambitious and you want to work hard, this is a great place to be.

**But it's going to be a lot of work...**
There's a lot of work to be done and it's at the edge of Bungie's envelope. We're pushing really hard every day to do stuff that the *Halo 1* team could never have done. Or the *Halo 2* team, the *3* team, the *Reach* team – [they] could not have done this game; it's just too big. So, as a creative person, if you want to work at Bungie, it means you like to kick a lot of ass, it means you like to work hard, [and] it means you like to reach really far beyond your abilities and now we have years of that ahead of us.

**It also seems that there isn't this insistence on endless crunch and cancelled holidays.**
The quality becomes the most important thing, and I think if we've learned anything it's that we can't continue to ship great games if we don't look after each other – I mean that broadly, from a management point of view. And I think we're healthier now. We have more producers, more support, more structure, and if we didn't have that we wouldn't be able to ship this game. We wouldn't be surviving for the next 8-10 years continuing to work on it.

We're into the first week of a controlled crunch. The team is crunching right now and will right up to just before the holidays. Instead of that being 'Holy shit!' we just need to work around the clock. It's a controlled crunch. People know when it's coming [and] well ahead of time. They understand what their tasks are, and they understand when the crunch ends and when to stand down and get some rest.





**Bungie's tribe swelled greatly over the course of *Halo* production, but the studio actively avoids taking on staff it can't sustain in the longterm**

# THE MAKING OF…
# Sleeping Dogs

How United Front Games' open-world homage to the Hong Kong action flick survived cancellation and came back stronger for it



A hardboiled action movie built to the *GTA* template, *Sleeping Dogs* stayed remarkably true to its creators' vision despite its rough development cycle

**Format** 360, PC, PS3
**Publisher** Square Enix
**Developer** United Front Games
**Origin** Canada
**Release** August 2012

The date was February 9, 2011, and **Stephen Van Der Mescht** had just concluded a meeting that no executive producer wants to have. That morning, he'd arrived at work as the person in charge of steering *True Crime: Hong Kong*, United Front Games' first open-world action title, towards completion. But now he was the man in charge of a game cast by its publisher, Activision, into limbo. It was a turn of events that no one at the Vancouver-based studio had seen coming, and one that even managed to catch a few staff at the publisher by surprise.

"The people that came up to cancel *True Crime*," Van Der Mescht recalls, "one of them was actually the VP on the project. And he didn't know this was happening, even the day before. The strategy from Activision came from on high. A lot of the people in the trenches weren't aware of the strategic shifts that the company was going to take. The VP… and, I think, the COO came up to the studio."

Activision's emissaries weren't just apologetic, the United Front Games team recalls, they were as upset as the development team. Just as this was the first cancellation that many of the studio's employees had experienced, it was the first cancellation that these particular representatives of Activision had ever had to administer.

"It was a hard day. There were a lot of people who were very upset. You feel very emotional about it"

"I remember I was sitting on a bean bag chair in one of our conference rooms when I heard the news," recalls producer **Dan Sochan**. "They were extremely respectful in telling us. It was extremely hard for them. We all understood the realities of the situation, and we had them in one case tearfully telling us what was happening. It was not a good day for either company."

Nonetheless, it was particularly bad for United Front, which now found itself empty handed, contractually speaking. Not only did Activision own the *True Crime* brand, but it effectively owned the game, character and mission designs that the studio had built with its financing. All United Front had to its name was an in-house open-world engine. Van Der Mescht sums up the studio's mood in the aftermath of the cancellation: "It was pretty devastating, to be honest with you. There were people there who had poured four years of their lives into something that we could see would be worthwhile. It was a hard day. There were a lot of people who were very upset. You feel very emotional about it, but my job immediately is starting to think about how we keep studio intact, how we keep the team intact.

"Because, you know, at the end of the day, from a company perspective, we've all been around the block. One of the things about United Front Games is that our average … development experience is more than ten years per employee. It's an experienced studio. So, you know, after the pure emotion dies down, we also understand it's just business and that's how business works. And our business very quickly became, 'OK, how do we salvage this thing?'"

**Four years prior** to that awful day, however, United Front's business had simply been making a great game. The studio formed in 2007, and was full of veterans from EA Black Box, Rockstar Vancouver, Volition and Radical Entertainment, so racing titles and open-world action games featured heavily on its collective CV. With the racing game talent occupied making *ModNation Racers*, it seems almost inevitable that when senior producer **Jeff O'Connell** met with creative director **Mike Skupa** and Sochan to outline the studio's second project, something like *True Crime* would emerge. Except, of course, it wasn't called *True Crime* at its inception.

"We connected with Activision immediately," explains O'Connell, "and they encouraged us to work on our own pitch to them for a new open-world franchise. At that point, Mike and myself and a few other guys came up with the idea of a game about a police officer in Hong Kong. We were inspired by Infernal Affairs, and the western version, The Departed, had just won [the Academy Award for] Best Picture the year before.

"A lot of us were fans of old Hong Kong cinema," adds Skupa. "Jet Li, Jackie Chan, Bruce Lee and John Woo stuff. But since Hong Kong cinema had already influenced so many games and Hollywood films, we really wanted to take a fresh angle on it. Around that time, there was this new wave of Hong Kong cinema coming out; there was Infernal Affairs and the films of Johnnie To, [which] had a darker, more serious tone."

The United Front team felt that if it used its open-world experience to craft a title that captured the grittier feel of these new Hong Kong action flicks, its game would stand out. "We wanted to create a homage to Hong Kong cinema", explains Skupa. "Something that was fresh in our eyes and the marketplace."

Unbeknownst to United Front, at least at first, was that Activision had a similar idea in the works. An ongoing Treyarch-developed project called *Black Lotus* was also set in a (fictionalised) East Asian city. A thirdperson action game that was at one point rumoured to star Lucy Liu, *Black Lotus* was by all accounts a less gritty, more comic-book caper than United Front's title. Nonetheless, it wasn't long before Activision, mindful of having two similar titles on its books and also keen to refocus Treyarch's efforts on *Call Of Duty* following the blockbuster success of *Modern Warfare*, cancelled that game and tried to import some of its features to United Front's title. Furthermore, while it wasn't conceived as a *True Crime* sequel, the United Front game's open-world setting and its undercover cop storyline gave Activision an excellent opportunity to resurrect the franchise.

"About a year into our work on what we were calling '*HK*', Activision approached us and said that they wanted to attach the *True Crime* name," explains O'Connell. "It wasn't something we were particularly keen on. We felt there were some legacy issues with that brand. And we really felt that what we were creating was a standalone piece. But, as I think the history books will say, we didn't win that one."

A compromise of sorts was reached. Activision got a new vehicle for a moderately successful licence, while United Front was able to describe the game as a reboot. In truth, the only change the rebrand required was to the title screen. No alterations were made to the mechanics or story, and United Front was able to keep its stylised take on Hong Kong, even though the *True Crime* games had previously placed great emphasis on their GPS-accurate takes on LA and New York.

Rebrand aside, all the members of the team describe the relationship between themselves and Activision as a close one. "Activision was certainly influential in the design and all the things you'd expect a publisher to have a role in from the start," remembers O'Connell. "It was a close relationship." The publisher was also supportive as the team tried to build a game to do justice to Wei Shen, its undercover cop, and his story.

"The game demanded such a heavy [reliance] on action," recalls Skupa, "but it was crucial that we also created a convincing open-world scenario where a character could get into these action moments, [and] also deal with the subtlety and nuance of his role as an undercover cop. So we basically had to set up scenarios in our fiction that would accommodate the balance of high-action pacing with the story we wanted to tell.

That went into the way we laid out our world, the way we set up our factions, and even the progression of our gameplay. We mapped out our pacing charts so that things started getting a lot more serious as the game progressed."

Worldbuilding was a challenge for the studio. Skupa and team were attracted to the way Hong Kong was at once familiar and exotic, known through cinema and yet relatively unexplored by games. It offered other contrasts as well, with its blend of Chinese and British influences. The tricky part, however, was capturing the spirit of this packed city while translating it into something players would enjoy traversing on foot and in car.

"We wanted to build an authentic world," art director **Hani Ghazaleh** explains, "but we wanted to ensure that it was fun. So the layout of the city was basically driven by gameplay. We wanted to create roads that were fun to drive on and fun to race on. That was one of our biggest challenges." Another challenge was line of sight issues, carefully laying out roads so that the art team could retain the level of detail it wanted given the very limited budget of an open-world game.

**When *True Crime*** was delayed from 2010 to 2011, no one at the studio had any inkling Activision was considering cancelling. "We were proceeding, business as usual, with them right up until the end," recalls Sochan.

Van Der Mescht had no real cause for concern either, though he was perhaps slightly more anxious than the rest of the team. Brought onto the project around the time it became a *True Crime* title, Van Der Mescht – an ex-Radical Entertainment executive who'd worked with members of the United Front team before – understood the production issues of making an open-world title. It's a genre built on interlocking, simultaneously running systems, which means that unlike linear level-based games, an open-world game doesn't tend to come together and start to look good until nearer the end of the project.

"When you make an open-world game, you're all in," he says. "You need a big streaming system with heavy resource management under the hood capable of jostling resources around at a moment's notice, because anything can happen. Getting to a point where you can quickly iterate on missions, scripts and design takes an enormous amount of time. We definitely felt pressure to get those things up and running quickly.

"We did have quite a bit of churn on the Activision side, and every time there's churn you get new people coming in who have slightly different perspectives on what the game should be. But, you know, we had a very close relationship, we had a very good relationship. They were great at giving feedback."

Despite this close relationship between United Front and the Activision staff overseeing the project, the publisher's higher-ups would ultimately decide that the tougher economic climate meant the business had to focus exclusively on best-in-show, genre-defining projects. And for all the team's efforts, *True Crime* simply wasn't shaping up to knock *Grand Theft Auto* off its perch. This was the real meaning behind CEO **Eric Hirshberg**'s widely reported comments that the game "just wasn't going to be good enough", made in an investor call on the day of the cancellation. Given the context, the team at United Front knew Hirshberg's meaning, but the wide reporting of the statement still stung.

It was a month and a half before United Front found itself in provisional talks with Square Enix. "There were a few other people who'd spoken to us," explains Van Der Mescht. "We know a lot of people, obviously – we've all worked with a bunch of different publishers, and there were a few people who came around and looked at the game and the team. At one point, we looked into just taking the engine code and doing something else." Having to junk four years of work would have been profoundly upsetting, but it would have meant less paperwork than the eventual solution.

"We only owned the engine, we didn't own any of the content, so to get a deal in place where the game was going to move forward, Activision had to be involved in the process. They had to license those assets. So putting a new deal in place was incredibly complex. It wasn't only a two-part deal between ourselves and a publisher, it was ourselves, a new publisher and Activision. The contracts had to go back and forth between all three parties to get the game back up and running. It was easily one of the most complex development negotiations I've ever been part of."

That new publisher was Square Enix, specifically its London Studio. After working closely with developers like Avalanche on *Just Cause 2*, it was well-versed in open-world design. General manager **Lee Singleton** had seen *True Crime* running and had faith in the project's potential. He would work closely with United Front over the next year, refining and polishing the game that Activision had cut loose. The team is full of praise for his studio's efforts. But, surprisingly perhaps, it has only positive things to say about Activision, too. "They were great in the whole process," says Van Der Mescht. "I'm personally very appreciative of the role they played in getting a deal signed."

"They were instrumental," says O'Connell.

After five years, a rebrand, a cancellation and a resurrection, how did it feel to see *Sleeping Dogs* released? "There's nothing quite like finishing a game, especially a game that has challenged you and challenged your team. You know, you spend so much of your life and so much of your time building a game like this... The level of pride we had in finishing this game was immense," says Van Der Mescht.

"I think it's difficult for people like [**Edge**] and people in the media. All you see is the game. And you stack it up against other games and put a score on it. You know, for us, the journey, making that game, the difficulties and challenges we went through to get it done, the personal toll from keeping on going when you feel like no one else believes in what you're doing... You know, I've never been more proud of anything than the fact it got done."

## Q&A



**Lee Singleton**
General manager, Square Enix London Studios

**What about *Sleeping Dogs* attracted Square Enix to the project?**
When we started playing the code, we instantly saw what UFG wanted to do, where they wanted to take the player. Even at this early stage, the core gameplay was rock solid and offered many mechanics that were best-in-class for an open-world game. We described it at the time as 'sticky': the sort of game where you just don't want to put the controller down. As you know, the game never started out as *True Crime*, so we could see it wouldn't take much to peel back that layer and rebrand it.

**Were there any doubts about picking up a project that had been so publicly dropped?**
If I'm honest, we knew everyone would write about the history. But, as the project progressed and we put the controllers in the hands of the press, it quickly became old news and *Sleeping Dogs* became our game.

**What do you think you brought to the game?**
We saved a great project, then added value to it... Our designers know how to fine-tune combat, exploration and moment-to-moment gameplay – we used the knowledge we gained with games like *Batman: Arkham Asylum* and *Just Cause 2* to understand better what players are looking for, and how we can make games that people want to keep coming back to.





ABOVE **From low-level Triads to middle-aged tea ladies to high-ranking British police inspectors, *Sleeping Dogs*' cast offers a broad cross-section of Hong Kong life. Its voice cast includes Emma Stone and Tom Wilkinson, and contracts had to be renegotiated once Square signed the title**

## Urban music

Getting the feel of a city is about more than just capturing its aesthetics and dropping in the odd landmark, as United Front would discover. It already knew that in going for a stylised take on Hong Kong the game wasn't going to be able to trade on the instant familiarity of other open-world titles. In practice, many districts didn't feel right until the density and composition of crowds and traffic were tweaked. More importantly, sound was vital to capturing Hong Kong's atmosphere. Sometimes ambient hubbub was all that was needed to bring a district to life; at others, something more specific was required. Hong Kong's pedestrian crossings produce an urgent rattling click when it's time to cross the road, for instance, and the team realised its take on the city was convincing when a playtester exited a blood-soaked session wanting only to talk about how the distinctive rattle transported him back to his time in the Far East.




**Scenes like the above define the game – the bustle, architecture and bright colours a marked visual contrast to other games**

THE ART OF...

# Gears Of War 3

How Epic maxed out the 360





This article's images appear courtesy of game art site Dead End Thrills (www.deadendthrills.com)

Objects to the rear of the screen may be closer than they appear – the art team distorted the scale of *Gears 3*'s scenery to draw the eye. The results can be awe-inspiring, offering the series' renowned sense of scale

# Q&A



**Wyeth Johnson**
Lead artist, Epic

To appreciate *Gears Of War 3* is to know the limitations of the Xbox 360 hardware. It is understanding the constraints of its tiny parcel of RAM, the old GPU, and the pitiless expectations of players regarding what a console should be able to do now, as opposed to seven years ago, despite no change in specs. *Gears Of War* was an Epic game; *Gears 3* is also an epic one. But how? **Wyeth Johnson** explains.

**How fundamentally did fourplayer co-op affect *Gears'* environmental design?**
The first thing is just that you need physical space for more players. So just the core ramification of [asking] 'Is this hallway wide enough to have a firefight with four people against four or five other things?' There are considerations in there that sometimes caused us to violate some of the ways we wanted to be inspired by the real world. The entrance to a grocery store or even the corridor of an aircraft carrier: these things are known quantities in our minds, but to support more players we have to find ways to widen them, make them taller, open up the space. You can kind of correct for that by making sure you have really great scale cues in the environment, so it doesn't feel alien to the player. That was something we went back and forth on quite often with the designers, finding that perfect balance between scope and scale, and the intimacy of a tighter environment to elicit a certain mood or feeling.

Also, visual clarity really comes to the forefront when you have four players running around. Because everybody needs something to shoot, the chaos level goes up. We made a lot of art choices to tone down some of that environmental detail and noise. Some of it comes through simply bringing the fog forward to have a clearer foreground and background separation; some of it's calming down the visual noise in the playspace and giving more detail to the exterior spaces. A lot of times you'll notice that the vista objects are proportionally out of scale to the stuff in the playspace, and that's intentional just to make a better connection between that foreground and background, and to emphasise something so it draws your eye. It's a hard problem.

**How do you even achieve a game like *Gears 3* on the same platform as *Gears 1*?**
If I go back and look at *Gears 1* and the progression to *Gears 3*, a lot of it is about confidence. We really didn't know anything with *Gears 1* – it was instinctual. It was the DNA of the team poured out in videogame form. It was so raw, and when you have an experience like that it's so formative. I strongly believe that's why many considered *Gears 1* the first true next-generation game. With that as

**_Gears 3_'s environments had to be bigger and tighter to support additional players, yet retain a sense of scope. All this had to be done without distorting the world so much as to make it feel alien to players**





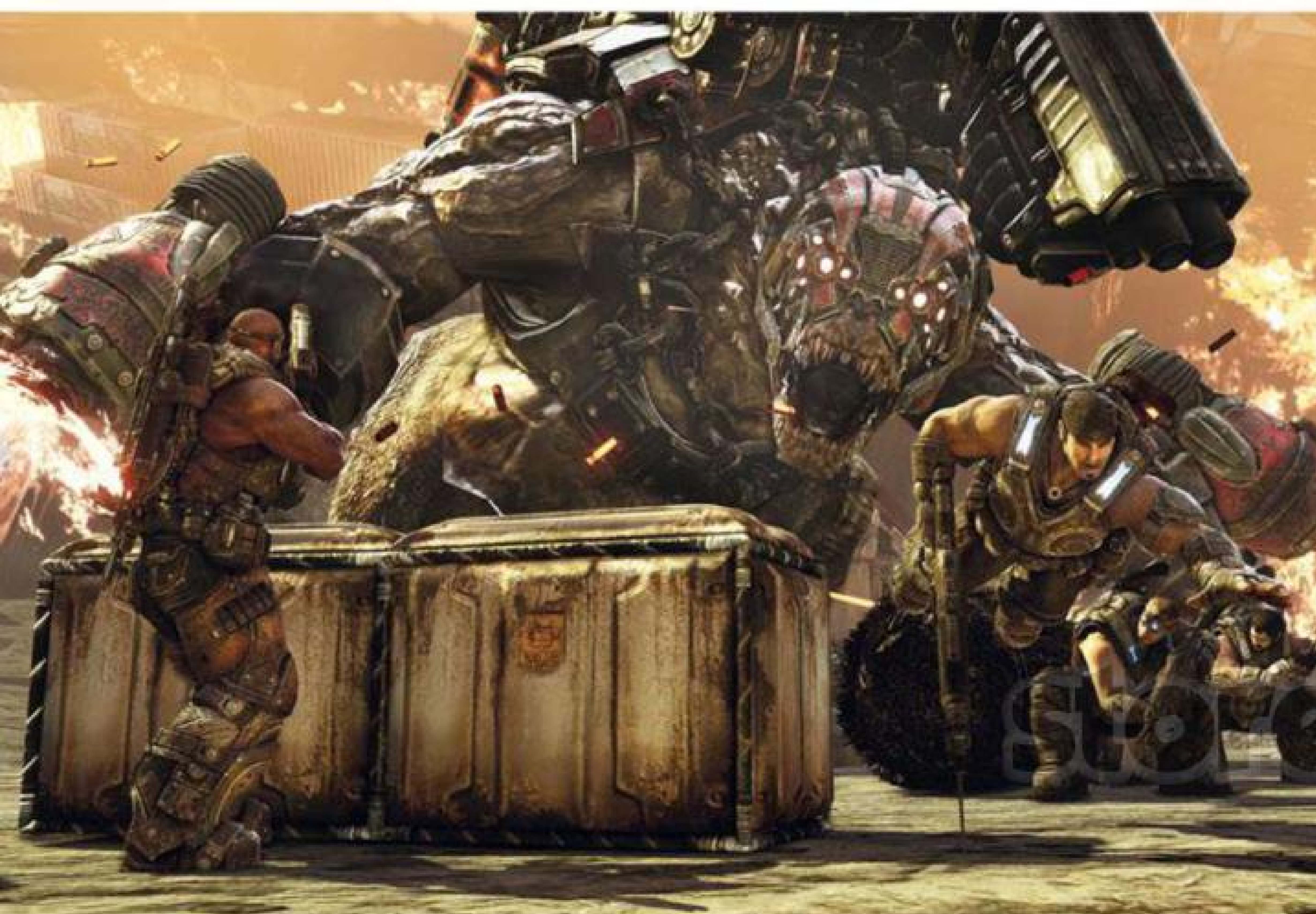


your base, it instils this confidence that you have room to experiment now, to play and take a risk. The universe speaks for itself – we don't have to do a lot of work to create more *Gears Of War*. The trick, really, is making a great choice up-front about what's important to the scene. We build smarter, not harder, now. We try not to kill ourselves on every dark corner.

**Was it daunting 'correcting' the series' gender ratio?**
Similar to the issues many other teams have had in this area, we had to make very pragmatic decisions very early on in the franchise that had nothing to do with our ideals. There was never an idealism about having this masculine cast. The balance in games needs to reflect the balance in real life, and that's always the goal. It was simply technical logistics that stopped it from happening, and with *Gears 3* we said we [weren't] going to let it happen again.

**How did you design those female characters?**
This was about the easiest thing, which was, [asking ourselves], 'In this universe we've created, given the difficulty of society and the realties of combat, what would these people actually look like?' And that's it. There was no more to it other than how would they truly fit when they're sitting next to their male counterparts in battle, preparing for a firefight, whatever it may be. There were a couple of little considerations – the iconic shapes for their armour, the larger boot shapes, being able to hold and wield the same weapons – but at the end of the day we just did what was right.

**How do you keep *Gears* characters readable despite such bulky armour?**
You need authenticity when it comes to motion. So long as we do the right things on the animation side to support these shapes and characters and silhouettes, it still feels right. So much of our effort has gone into: 'When I take cover, what happens?' Sure, I hit the A button and I connect to something, but what really happens? There's a controller rumble; there's a particle effect of dust that flies up into play; there's a really chunky sound of metal armour, leather and rubber all slamming into this stone object; there's foot sliding sounds and the grunt of the character; and the camera shake. All of these subtle things add up to a feeling that I'm touching the world. If you get that right then you can play in a lot of other areas, and I feel that *Gears Of War*, without any prior precedent, plain got it right pretty much on the first try. ■



# What Games Are



## TADHG KELLY

### The TweeBC

Among broadcasters, such as the BBC or Sky, the ambitions for games vary from social issue education to pure revenue generation. It depends on who the broadcaster is and what kind of remit they have. Yet in general, the process of making games with broadcasters is difficult. In fact, the relationship between games and TV has always been weird.

As organisations, broadcasters' understanding of games is rather parochial. They seem trapped in a twee universe where games are either cuddly brand supporters or ultraviolent death machines. In many cases, it's because the people in charge of the commissioning budgets aren't gamers, and think of them as wastes of time or sources of addiction. In broadcast, they're still asking if games help in learning, whether it would better to not let children play so many games, and so on.

Often, the people who produce games at broadcasters are gamers, but don't enjoy the creative freedoms other parts of the organisation do. BBC Worldwide's purpose is to generate revenue from BBC intellectual property, and it was a similar story for me at Sky. As a producer, I knew that we could be making many more kinds of games, but the culture was such that we could only allow ourselves to make platformers based on cartoon characters, casual games or games based on shows like Deal Or No Deal.

Broadcasters only ever seem to show interest in a few genres. One is educational games. Another is interactive narrative. Broadcasters love didactic point-making projects like TryLife, an adventure designed to show the consequences of decisions for teenagers. Broadcasters also love historical games in which the player travels back in time to unearth clues and learn more about the period. Or 2D Flash web games (and, recently, apps) with limited gameplay and heavy branding.

You know, nonsense projects that win interactive BAFTAs but have no effect on the real world. We game people are complicit in this fiction. Games and TV are modally very different, yet we entertain the lie that they are coming together because TV people want to spend some (but not much) money on making games. This means we end up making terrible games, but a gig is a gig. However, that doesn't really help.




**Thousands of hours of gaming media content are generated online every week… None of this exists on television**

In November, I was invited to participate on a panel at the Fusion Summit. It was an event where broadcast and game thinking collided, in particular on questions of where the two could meet, the value of games in education, and the future. There I saw much honest intent, but also that the twee is still very much alive, particularly in regard to the kinds of project commissioned.

In broadcast land, it is popular to imagine that games and TV are coming together, but usually what that means is games becoming a kind of broadcast-plus. On our panel, we discussed this future, but it seems to me that it's really about culture. I said I wanted to see broadcasters commission games with the same breadth of creative relevance as TV. My point was (and is) to encourage them to get past thinking the future of games is a bit like the film eXistenZ – games aren't just interactive adventures with signposted plotting and meaningful moments.

On TV, content ranges from the sublime to the ridiculous, from the deeply shocking to the entirely frivolous. Using the example of *Super Meat Boy*, I asked why broadcasters can't seem to grasp that this breadth of culture exists in games, too. Why always the twee and the trite?

The main organs with the power to change this twee perception of games are broadcasters. On one panel at the Summit, a member of the audience asked whether broadcasters and games could ever be taken seriously when there's still no TV coverage of games. Thousands of hours of gaming media content are generated online every week, from podcasts to video reviews, machinima shows and more. None of this exists on TV, so is it any wonder that TV people don't know how far behind they are? Perhaps the future lies in making television shows about games, rather than games about television shows. Not so much broadcast-plus as digital versions of the Olympics. Actually, sports are well worth looking at in this respect.

It is conventionally accepted that sports are good for you, and billions of people are culturally invested in them. To borrow Dan Cook's term, sports are an example of generative culture. They act as sources of emergent meaning as a result of play, rather than venues for gamifying a narrative. Sometimes these meanings turn into stories, from Muhammad Ali to Invictus' Springboks.

I see something similar for games, but it needs a broadcaster to make that show happen. No one's putting Consolevania or Zero Punctuation on national TV, and when games shows are made they tend to be insipid. There's no Newsnight Review of games, or even a version of The Word.

Our art form is simply missing from the national broadcast, and this is why it remains twee in the minds of many. Games are as valid as music or theatre, and deserve proper coverage. The day when the BBC or Sky commission a *Super Meat Boy* might be a way off still, but surely it's time that broadcasters updated their frame of reference?

*Tadhg Kelly has worked in games, from tabletop to consoles, for nearly 20 years. Visit him at www.whatgamesare.com*


EST.1984
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REFLECTIONS

# In The Click Of It



## CLINT HOCKING

### Abdicating authorship revisited

At GDC 2000, Doug Church first established the concept of abdication of authorship. It's the idea that in attempting to deliver a specific player experience, the designer inhibits the player's ability to generate her own (usually more meaningful) experience, and that players would therefore be better served if designers would abdicate authorship to them.

Over the intervening years, this concept has evolved in different ways as various developers have interpreted the concept to suit their goals and their design approaches. I believe there now exist different interpretations of this concept that are in some cases at odds with one another. Some interpretations are more interesting and relevant than others, and untangling them may help refresh our understanding of the concept.

The biggest straw man interpretation is the one that accuses designers who endeavour to abdicate authorship of being lazy or neglectful of their duty as creators. This interpretation suggests that by abdicating authorship designers aren't saying anything at all, or worse, have nothing to say. I believe this too-literal reading defines an important theoretical edge that designers should not cross. But, frankly, I have yet to experience a game where a thoughtful designer has abdicated authorship to such an extent that the game became voiceless and meaningless. I believe it is far more common to see games where, in attempting to author an explicit message, the designers deliver a meaningless mess where the authored messages clamour in discord with player-generated meaning. In short, the claim that abdication of authorship equals lack of voice is not supported by evidence.

Another interpretation that I find difficult to reconcile with what I believe Church meant upholds abdication of authorship while selling games short as a medium of and for expression. If you go to an Ikea store, you may see a Plexiglas display case within which a robot tirelessly opens and closes a storage cabinet once every second, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Such a display demonstrates that the cabinet and its ceramic and zinc handles excellently serve the functional imperatives of cabinetness. At the same time, this utilitarian approach views the object of the design through a functional lens and in a very real sense abdicates authorship.



**I believe this interpretation of abdicating authorship is useful when designing handles, but it's misguided for games**

But in this paradigm, the ideal cabinet handle becomes an obstacle to the will of the user, whose desire is not for the handle itself, but for whatever is inside the cabinet. As such, the ideal design approach would have thousands of users use the handle thousands of times, iterating the design and reshaping the handle until the grasping of the handle and the opening of the cabinet becomes an event that disappears from the user experience entirely, and the acquiring of the Xanax inside becomes a direct expression of the user's will.

In the current approach, authorship is abdicated, but not to the player. It is abdicated to the statistical model, to the market research investigation, to the Ikea robot arm, or to the 'Urplayer', who exists in reality about as much as the average 2.2nd American child does. I believe that this interpretation of abdicating authorship is very useful when designing cabinet handles, but it's misguided when designing games.

On the other end of the discussion, in the wake of the games-as-art debate, a few indie designers whose work I respect have refuted certain aspects of Church's concept. They point out that it is often through the 'rough edges' of a work that the authorial voice is revealed, and that, almost by definition, the modern triple-A game that seeks to remove rough edges for the sake of accessibility, usability and/or mass-market appeal effectively polishes away the voice of the author. They imply that authorship is not (and cannot be) abdicated, because it's eradicated by the commercial development processes.

Like cigarette butts embedded in a Jackson Pollock painting, I agree that these rough edges can speak to the presence and expression of the author. I further agree that the commercial reproduction of Pollock paintings would see those unsightly cigarette butts removed because everyone agrees that cigarette butts are gross.

At the same time, however, I am not convinced that Pollock's Marlboros are anything more than a red herring in the abdication of authorship debate. In the games-as-art camp, these rough edges are important to the understanding of what games are, and upholding their importance is central to the establishment and acceptance of games-as-art. But I think that abdication of authorship is almost entirely orthogonal to the games-as-art discussion. Games can be art, and games can have rough edges. Rough edges in the rules or mechanics of the game itself may help define the game as art, but I am not particularly interested in whether the game itself is art or not.

Abdication of authorship – to me at least – is about play-as-art. It's about giving the player a set of boundaries and tools through which she is able to express herself, and the idea of the designer leaving rough edges as a signature, intentionally or otherwise, may or may not serve that goal.

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EA

# The Possibility Space



## RANDY SMITH

### Dishonored is the new Thief

Perhaps it seems like sacrilege to suggest that *Dishonored* is better than the revered *Thief* series, but as someone who played increasingly significant roles on the first three *Thief* games, I can tell you *Dishonored* manages to solve crucial gameplay problems that we never quite figured out in *Thief*.

Take the escape problem. *Thief* could wear out the autoload button on your keyboard. You'd be moving from one shadow to another, sneaking away from a suspicious guard, and with one false step you're busted. At which point, you could play through the inevitable slaughter or just skip those three minutes and autoload to a moment before the wrong move. Our intention was to make escape fun, but despite oil slicks, flashbombs, and more, stirring up the hornets' nest never became as worthwhile as pretending it never happened. *Dishonored* handles it much better, most crucially because of the Blink spell. By teleporting, you can instantly escape to rooftops, across gaps, or just far enough away to confound pursuers. And when all else fails, *Dishonored*'s sword fighting, refined over years with Arkane's earlier titles *Dark Messiah* and *Arx Fatalis*, is a viable set of mechanics, unlike *Thief*'s deliberately clunky melee combat. In *Dishonored*, getting caught leads to fun and controllable escape improvisation, an emergent narrative I'm usually happy to accept sans reload.

*Dishonored*'s setting allows it to mix and match from among the best tools throughout the history of immersive sims. For example, in *Thief*, you'd often round a corner into a patrol you had no way to predict, but in *Dishonored*, as in *Deus Ex*, the ability to see through walls puts advance scouting in your control regardless of context. The Blink and Bend Time spells used in combination provide a whole new vocabulary for stealth I'm just beginning to explore, allowing you to sneak through impossible situations and away from certain discovery, ambush impervious guard stations, and untangle complex missteps. Lacking these, *Thief* was often too difficult, a problem to which I contributed. As a level designer early in my career, I was learning hard lessons about self-editing, making levels manageable in size and challenge, and the difference between knowing the perfect path and encountering it as a new player. *Dishonored*'s level design knows players enjoy a balance that includes easier experiences, which offer the chance to feel empowered and express their own style. It's also liberal with dark niches, routes through the rafters and all the things thieves crave, ironically more so than *Thief* was.



**The Blink and Bend Time spells provide a whole new vocabulary for stealth I'm just beginning to explore**

So that and more is why I suggest *Dishonored* might be the better game. But, of course, as one of the creators of the *Thief* series, my opinion has no authority; my position doesn't allow me to make valid comparisons to *Thief*. The act of designing a game, of assembling the gears and wires under the hood, of having an understanding of what it's intended to accomplish, shatters the illusion and robs you of any legitimate audience perspective. When I play *Dishonored*, I'm inside my own unexpected and novel narrative, intrigued by the mysteries and surprised by what's next, making choices from the options presented to me. When I play *Thief*, or any other game I helped create, I can only see the possibility space, an invisible, abstract, multidimensional structure meant to offer every player those choices, guide some players here and others there, draw attention, pose quandaries, and build mystery. I'm evaluating all the intersecting paths of all possible players and how well this machinery of game design achieves its goals, which is nothing like having a player's experience. I don't know if *Dishonored* is the better game, because I can't say whether *Thief* is any good.

But it seems many would say *Thief* is as good as I say *Dishonored* is. Although *Dishonored* has evolved stealth past *Thief*'s stumbling blocks, it runs into some of its own. As dignified Corvo, the disgraced bodyguard reduced to assassination in order to manipulate political situations, I feel out of character so blatantly exploring and robbing every location I encounter. Shouldn't I be on an arrow-straight, blinders-on, focused course to completing my grim missions? *Thief*'s Garret was designed with an internal struggle between selfish greed and principled purpose in part to justify any amount of larceny a player was inclined toward. Similarly some players might wince about all the sorcery Corvo employs, whereas by comparison Garrett relied on brawn and agility, supplemented by a fancy toolkit. It works within Corvo's fiction, but might not translate well into *Thief*. Players might also take exception to how many pages *Dishonored* lifts straight from the *Thief* (and other immersive sim) playbooks: the goofy overheard conversations, the body-carrying side quests, the dark paths through the rafters. If you played both, it probably felt fresher when *Thief* originated those ideas. Or maybe not; I'll never know. Despite similarities, they are very different creations, each with its own nuanced substance. I'm sure it was unique and absorbing to be immersed in *Thief*'s world back in 1997. Since I can never have that experience, I'm very grateful to have been immersed in *Dishonored* in 2012.

*Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style. He has also compiled his favourite songs into a mix: www.bit.ly/VgA56n*

# Word Play



## JAMES LEACH

### The art of conversation

Lately, I've been writing a lot of game dialogue. I've heartily welcomed this, because my last few projects have been largely made up of instructional text, in-game messages and all that kind of shenanigans. All good stuff, but not as fun as writing conversations people might actually have.

But let's be honest, they're not really have-able conversations. Have you heard the sort of conversations people really have? They are rubbish. Go and have a conversation now. I'll wait… OK, you're back. Rubbish, wasn't it? By which I mean that if you wrote down what is said day in, day out between people and you read it back, you'd sicken yourself with the pointlessness of it all. Partly, this is because nothing interesting happens to us. We don't wake up in a lawless city armed only with a railgun and a headache. Nor do we get to decide between being a good god or an evil one. So of course the conversations in games aren't realistic – they're held between people in incredible situations.

Oh, and they aren't conversations. They're people telling you, the player, things. Games, it will come as no great surprise, are about doing things and reacting to events, and to successfully deal with this you need to be told tons of stuff. This being told often passes for story in the videogame world. Whereas we both know that story is actually far more about people changing as they experience new things and make important decisions. And you find out about people changing when you get to eavesdrop on their conversations.

So let's put conversations into games, shall we? No, let's not. What's riveting and intense in a book or film is usually simply an interruption in a game. Plus, as avid readers who haven't destroyed their memories with excess will know, films and books are about someone, but games are about you. Plus, the characters have to be believable and well drawn and animated in order not to grate against the nuances of a 'real' conversation. Plus, you need really good voice acting to carry it off. There are, in fact, lots of plusses to not doing it.

But then again there's Jeremy Blaustein. If you don't know who he is, imagine his name there in




**Of course the conversations in games aren't realistic – they're held between people in incredible situations**

blue and underlined. Click it to find him on Wikipedia. He is a Japanese/English translator of games. He's responsible for the English scripts of *Metal Gear Solid* and the *Silent Hill* series from *2* onwards. Frankly, he's not just a translator, he's an artist and a genius. If you've played the games above, or anything he's worked on, you'll agree.

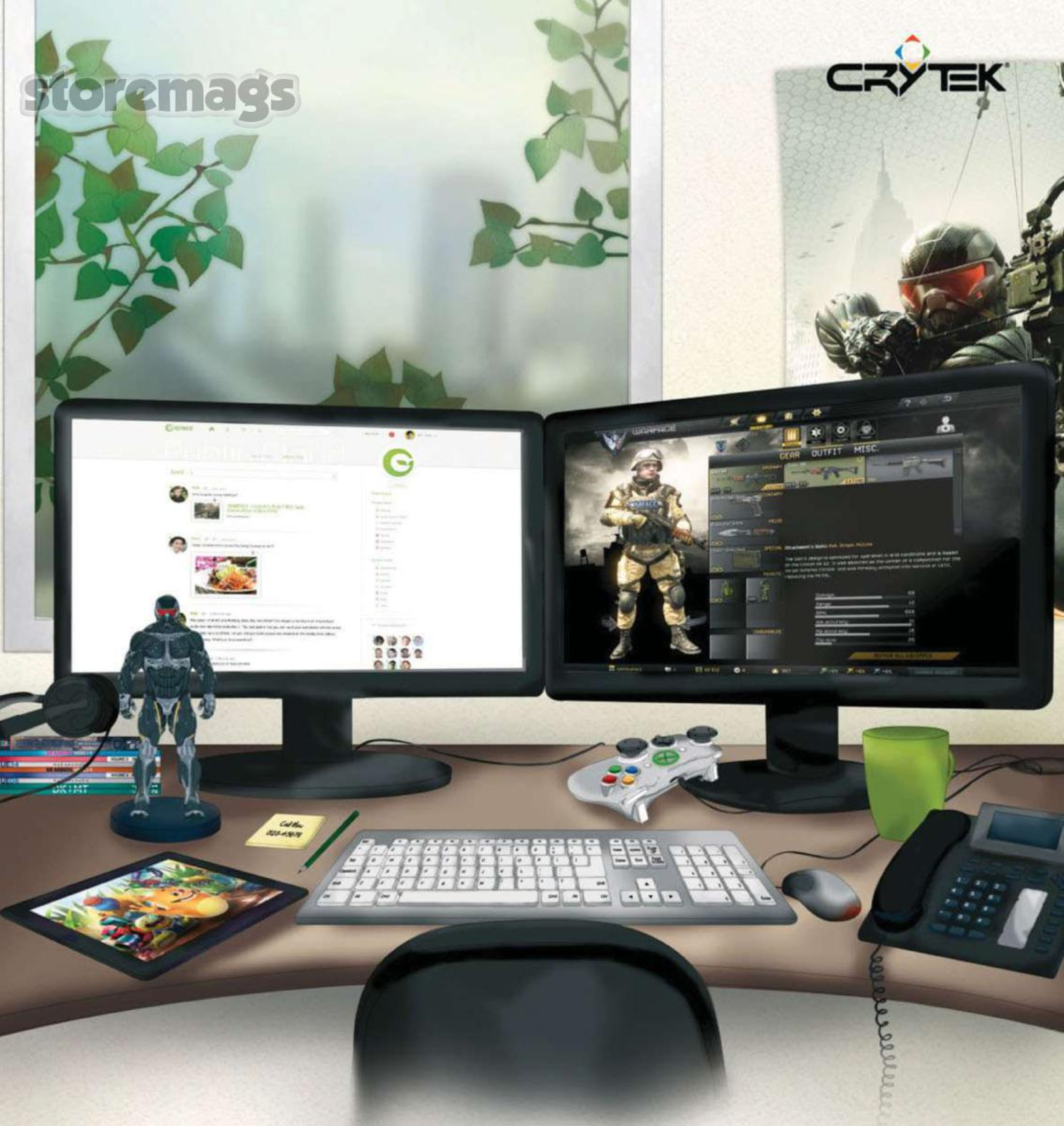
Why does his stuff stand out? First and foremost, he has a beautifully light, natural style. Games are full of earth-shattering apoco-caust stuff and the temptation is to laden the speech with clanging biblical lines of doom. But not to do so, as Jeremy shows, can be far more powerful. It's the delicate moments; the small tells that reinforce the emotional impact far more than table-thumping rhetoric. Jeremy knows this. And because I'm an admirer of his work, I do too. And because you're reading this, so do you. We're all happy.

There is, however, another element to all this. The stuff our Mr Blaustein translates is Japanese, and it turns out they do enjoy a lot more dialogue in their games than the rest of us. Sure, you can often press X to skip past it all, but it's there, and it's there for a reason. Well, two reasons: to tell you what's going on and what you have to do, and also to establish an emotional connection between you and the game; the very thing I said earlier that there are lots of plusses to not doing. Could you imagine any of the range of *Silent Hills* without the connection to the characters? Would the Snakes of *Metal Gear Solid*, in their various physical states, have been worth caring about without the dialogue? Without Jeremy's dialogue?

What I've cleverly done is argue, like much of the development industry, that conversations in games don't add much, and you need to tell the player stuff and let them get on with doing it. Then I've turned it around and said that some of the best games, the games you care about and which stun you with the plot and characters, do have conversations. And you sit and watch them because they work. And in the back of your mind you're aware that it's OK because the game is Japanese and that's how they are. Someone says something. You press a button. Someone else answers. You press a button. And so on. But thanks to people like Jeremy Blaustein, it isn't like that and your immersive enjoyment of the product is greatly enhanced by knowing the characters better than you expected to, and thus feeling more attuned to the dilemmas they face. And perhaps you also like by the way they speak, which reminds you of reality and doesn't sound like voiced-over recording booth gamespeak. We've come a long way since "All your base"…

Remember, though, that Japan is the place where they think you, the player, want to know the blood group of the characters you can play. So sometimes they're not all that. And a line Jeremy translated in *Velvet Assassin* sounded a little melodramatic to me. So perhaps he's not all that. There. I'm being cynical again and it feels good.

*James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer who works on games and for ad agencies, TV, radio and online*


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